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ABSTRACT

Through its efforts in 12 middle schools in 5 cities, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Disadvantaged Youth is trying to challenge the assumption that certain children are uneducable. The first steps in this program were detailed in "Gaining Ground," which described the thoughts and hopes of educators in 1989 through 1991 as they began to plan to educate their students more effectively through the foundation's grants. This book reviews the second phase of the initiative, between 1991 and 1993. In the face of poverty, family and social instability, and violence, middle school reform is struggling to take hold, but it is slowly becoming reality. Project sites include: (1) two schools in Baltimore (Maryland); (2) two in Milwaukee (Wisconsin); (3) two in San Diego (California); (4) three in Louisville (Kentucky); and (5) three in Oakland (California). These years have been frustrating as well as exciting in project schools, which have been charged to focus on the three "high;" namely, high expectations, high content, and high support. This book presents not conclusions, nor recommendations, but rather impressions of the unfolding reform process. A list of resource organizations is included. (Contains 47 references.) (SLD)

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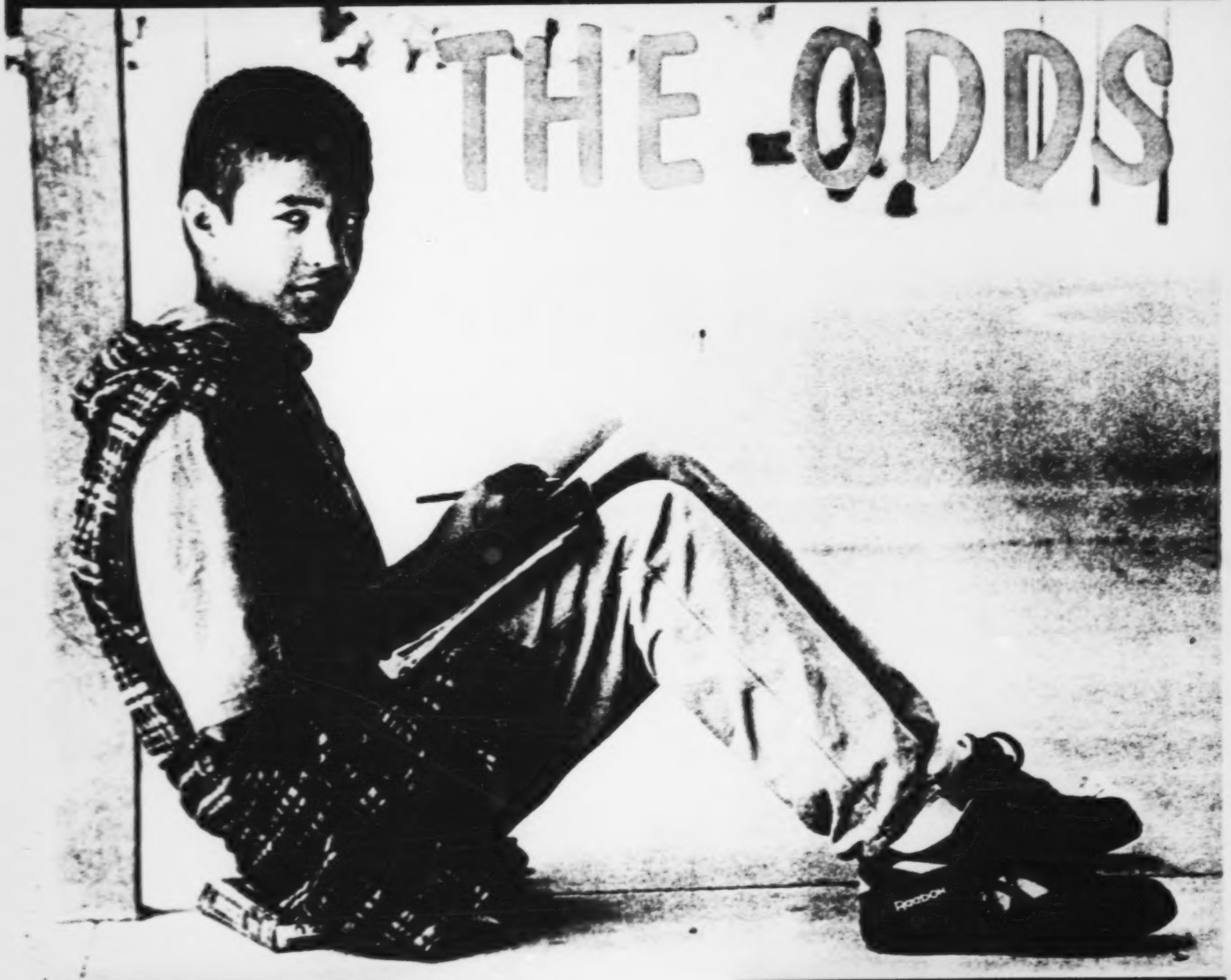
MIDDLE SCHOOL
REFORM
IN PROGRESS
1991-1993

CHANGING THE ODDS



By **ANNE C. LEWIS**

Foreword by
Lorraine Monroe

Photographs by
Nita Winter

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Credits

Anne C. Lewis is an education policy writer in the Washington, D.C. area who writes the national column for *Phi Delta Kappan*. She authored *Restructuring America's Schools* for the American Association of School Administrators, *Making it in the Middle* and *Gaining Ground* for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and is the narrative documentor for the National Alliance for Restructuring Education. What she really likes most, however, is to be among the young people who may not understand about policymaking, but are so wise about their own world.

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Copies of this publication are available through the Clark Foundation's Office of Communications. Copies of *Gaining Ground*, a report on the first two years of the Foundation's middle grades initiative (1989-1991), are also available on request.

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FOREWORD

By Lorraine Monroe

In the minds of far too many people in this country–some of them education experts–the feeling persists that certain children are uneducable. Behind the spoken label "disadvantaged" is the furtive assumption that these are kids who simply cannot learn. Acceptance of this assumption has led to hopelessness on the part of teachers and school administrators, and it has virtually condemned the children to nonproductive, even destructive, lives.

The catch is that the assumption is not true. It cries out to be challenged, and that is what the Clark Foundation's Program for Disadvantaged Youth is trying to do in 12 middle schools in five cities.The Clark initiative has a chance to succeed, first of all, because of its insistence on student achievement, the bottom line of all school reform. This is expressed in the core focus of the program–high expectations, high content, high support–the guidelines for any reforms the participating schools put in place.

High expectations are essential. Neither students, nor teachers, nor society at large are served when poor sociological or environmental factors are allowed to excuse poor performance or to license indifference or inertia. School must serve as the incredible interruption in children's lives–*especially* when their circumstances are difficult. To maintain anything less than the most rigorous academic standards is no favor to these or any children.

The Clark initiative recognizes that concretizing this focus will require systemic change in many schools. Essential to such change is the kind of staff development that the initiative emphasizes. The attitudes of teachers and administrators will only begin to change when both learn new ways to work with kids. The training that provides this also prepares teachers and administrators not to accept mediocrity, much less failure, from their students or from themselves.

HIGH CONTENT
SUPPORT
ENERGY
INVOLVEMENT
VOLUNTEERS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

Louisville gives the lie to the assumption that disadvantaged kids cannot learn. Western Middle School's hallways announce the district's High^5 initiative: high expectations, high content, high support, high energy, and high involvement.

And patience is required. Different schools arrive at reform in different ways and on different schedules. Reform itself is notoriously site-specific: something that works in Milwaukee may not necessarily work in San Diego. On the other hand, it may work, or pieces of it may be successfully adapted.

The goal—expecting students and teachers to stretch—should never vary, but it is downright healthy that the paths leading to the goal vary. It may be

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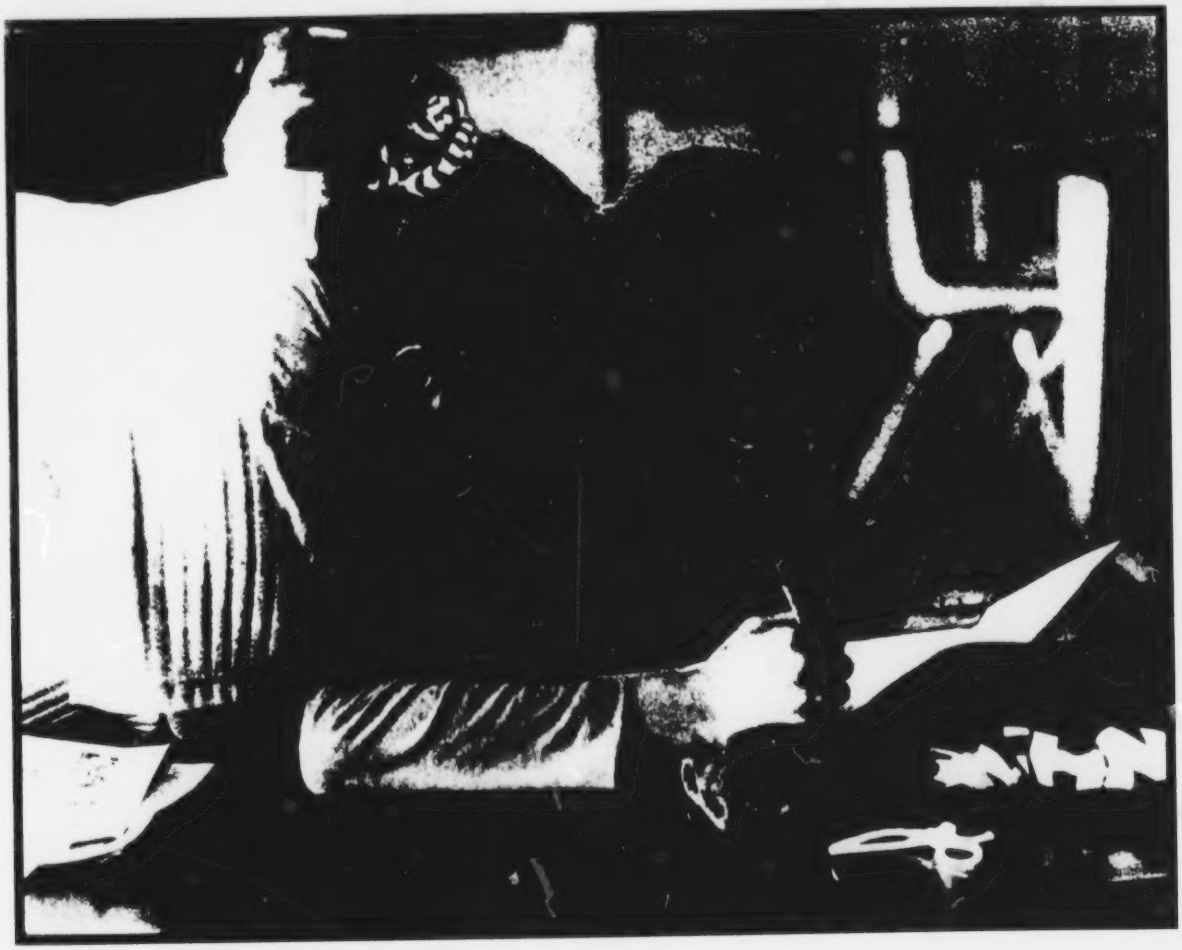
a cliche, but dollars and resources alone will not bring about reform. Without attention to people, in all their variety, reform will not work. At my school, the Frederick Douglass Academy in New York's Harlem, we work hard to develop a cadre of believers among teachers and administrators–we call them "creatively crazy maniacs." Such creativity needs time; so does building belief in the creativity. The Clark effort gives schools this time–enough time to make mistakes, realize it, and start over.

Middle schoolers are curious, enthusiastic, indefatigable, and facile learners.

Allowing time can pay off handsomely. When we began our program to rejuvenate the tradition of excellence at the Frederick Douglass Academy,



it was a school few parents would have chosen for their children. In my first year as principal, I had to beat the bushes just to get a class of 150 students; now we have five or six applicants for every opening. Last year, we were number one in our district in standardized reading and math test scores. This year, we are aiming to be number one in Manhattan.

Now in its third year, the program at Frederick Douglass represents an evolutionary transformation. But change was evident very early on, and this too is essential. *Something* that manifests reform must happen quickly, and the Clark initiative, while patient in allowing evolutionary change, is at the same time impatient in demanding timely action. There is no "paralysis of analysis" in the stories told in this book. The Clark program replaces that with wide-ranging consulting, with listening and responding to people in the network, with parent involvement, and by merging the expertise of "outsiders" flown in for a day or two with the expertise of local consultants who are on call full-time. Such groundwork is essential for creating the flexibility within a central administration that is a requirement for systemic change.

As the "place in between," the middle school was not expected to achieve much, so any program would do.

Most interesting of all, however, is that the initiative has been applied to middle schools, traditionally the neglected no-man's-land of educational reform. As the "place in between," the middle school was not expected to achieve much, so any program would do.

But in fact, as my own experience as a middle school teacher confirmed for me, children in the middle years are ripe for change; middle schoolers are curious, enthusiastic, indefatigable, and facile learners. The very neglect of the programs in middle schools makes them fertile places for reform, since nothing has yet "hardened."

And the 12 schools chosen offer difficult proving ground, indeed. They are the ones with students who are too often labeled hopeless causes and teachers who seem to have fallen into the habit of hopelessness. The Clark initiative's attempt in this terrain, as related in the pages that follow, gives the lie to the failure of hope. It holds forth the promise that all of our schools are indeed capable of transforming the lives of all of our children.

Lorraine Monroe is principal of the Frederick Douglass Academy, a public school in New York City. She is chair of the advisory committee of the Clark Foundation's Program for Disadvantaged Youth.

INTRODUCTION

By M. Hayes Mizell

Two years ago, in *Gaining Ground*, Anne Lewis described the first tentative steps of the school systems in Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego to fundamentally change the way they educated young adolescents. Focusing on 12 schools across the five districts, educators in these schools were just beginning to think about how to more effectively educate all their students, and *Gaining Ground* reflected both their hopes and confusion between 1989 and 1991. While teachers and administrators were encouraged by the recognition and resources that came with a grant from a national foundation, they were not always certain how to proceed. They had more access to expertise than ever before, but they had to learn how to use it and hammer out a vision for themselves and their schools.

In this book, *Changing the Odds*, Anne Lewis shares her perspective on the second phase of the initiative, covering the period between 1991 and 1993. The lives of young adolescents are in greater peril than just a few years ago, because more youth are experiencing poverty, family and community instability, and violence. These circumstances, combined with reductions in school funding and revolving-door principals and superintendents, make it difficult for middle school reform to take root.

In the midst of this bleak tableaux, however, Anne Lewis finds small miracles that yield significant results. Slowly, middle school reform is becoming a reality. More teachers believe that all students can perform at high levels; and as a result of intensive and high-quality staff development, more teachers are confident they can help them do so. Learning is more active and challenging, and students are less often bored by their classroom experiences. In spite of mounting problems beyond the schools' control, some have dramatically reduced retentions and suspensions and improved student attendance and the performance of low achieving students. Some of the schools have developed more productive educational cultures, raised teacher morale, and seen the benefits reform can yield.

Where schools have made significant progress, it is because heroic teachers and administrators have chosen to focus on reforming what they do and how they do it. They have been dogged in their determination to remain on the path to *re*forming their schools, even though that path has not always been straight or smooth. We are encouraged that central offices are increasingly providing the support the schools deserve and drawing on their experiences to help shape middle school reform throughout the districts. Other educators involved in the Clark project, however, have struggled to sustain their initial vision and energy, or retreated to the comfortable familiarity of their schools' operational "imperatives."

Students crowd the halls between classes at Mann Middle School in San Diego. Teachers in the 12 project schools have found that reform is harder than they expected.

As in *Gaining Ground*, Anne Lewis has captured the excitement, complexity, and demands of this reforming movement. The educators with whom she spoke have learned that this process is more difficult than they imagined, but believe they and their schools are better because of it. They are determined to press on, with an increasing commitment to address long-standing assumptions and practices that represent barriers to providing an education of high expectations, high content, and high support for middle school youth. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation is grateful for these educators' optimism and for their talent, which inspires us as much as it does their students.

M. Hayes Mizell is the director of the Clark Foundation's Program for Disadvantaged Youth.

HOLDING GROUND

Once past the front door (now always locked) of Calverton Middle School in Baltimore, you go up a few stairs to a landing just outside the principal's office. Most students come through here during the school day, past two ordinary exhibits, one in a corner, another hung on the wall close to it. Rarely does anyone notice these displays, but, in a sense, they are visible metaphors for what it is like to be in urban schools today, under stress but undergoing change.

One is a glass trophy case, filled with the glories of the school's past and a few new ones brought home by revitalized sports teams. "The staff warned me against putting these out," admits the principal, who, though half the size of many of her students, can be quite adamant about her ideas. "But they're still here, at the end of the school year. The students are proud of them."

On the wall beside the case is another symbol–a chart begun when the school year started, showing monthly averages of student *and* teacher absenteeism. The two bars are much the same–they record that only about 90% of both groups are showing up. The chart ends in December 1992, but still hangs in the hall five months later, a victim, perhaps, of disillusionment that this attempt to cajole both the young and the adults to do better didn't work.

The trophies are stand-ins for the hopes, the successes, the pride that urban middle schools can achieve with very poor children. The chart shows the realities, the stubbornness of the problems that pull these schools down.

Calverton, fortunately, has had time to think about both hopes and realities. One of 12 urban middle schools in five cities receiving support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to enact fundamental changes, it is neither the most successful nor the least so among its peers. Calverton's experiences are close to the norm; some good progress, some setbacks, and a lot of learning about what to do and what stands in the way after four years of effort at turning things around.

Yet, Calverton, along with the other 11 schools in the network, will never be the same as it was before it tried. Call it a cliché–the "sweet smell of success," perhaps–but there is too much evidence around them that their efforts paid off to ever go back to accepting failure.

This report attempts to record how deeply troubled urban middle schools, where failure was the norm, hope the exception, can change the outcomes of their students.

Western Middle School students in Louisville work in teams. There is too much evidence that reforms are paying off to ever go back to accepting failure.

Reforms with a Focus

When this initiative for the middle grades began in 1989, few inner-city middle schools had thought much about undertaking major reforms to help students succeed. They acknowledged problems but lacked the know-how or commitment to make sure their students were prepared for high school. Getting them ready for college-preparatory work in high school rarely came

BALTIMORE

Calverton

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 1,315

68% eligible for free lunch

All students proficient in English

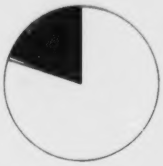
RACE/ETHNICITY
African-American 92%
Latino and Asian 1%
White 7%

West Baltimore

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 1,690

57% eligible for free lunch

All students proficient in English



African-American 80%
Asian 1%
White 19%

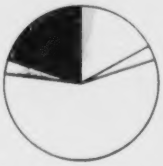
MILWAUKEE

Kosciuszko

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 741

84% eligible for free lunch

7% with limited proficiency in English



African-American 17%
Asian 3%
Latino 57%
Native American 3%
White 20%

Parkman

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 521

94% eligible for free lunch

All students proficient in English

African-American 98%
Asian, Native American, and White 2%

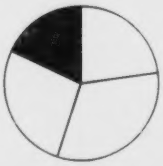
SAN DIEGO

Horace Mann

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 1,863

75% eligible for free lunch

47% with limited proficiency in English



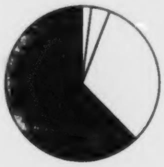
African-American 23%
Asian 32%
Latino 27%
White 18%

Muirlands

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 830

22% eligible for free lunch

15% with limited proficiency in English



African-American 2%
Asian 4%
Latino 32%
White 60%
Other 2%

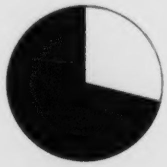
LOUISVILLE

Iroquois

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 887

48% eligible for free lunch

All students proficient in English



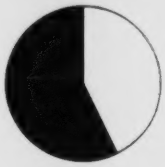
RACE/ETHNICITY
African-American 29%
White 71%

Southern

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 909

64% eligible for free lunch

All students proficient in English



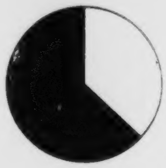
African-American 43%
White 57%

Western

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 850

72% eligible for free lunch

All students proficient in English



African-American 37%
White 63%

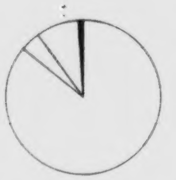
OAKLAND

Frick

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 650

62% eligible for free lunch

10% with limited proficiency in English



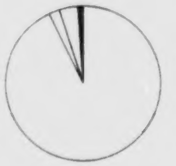
African-American 86%
Asian 4%
Latino 9%
White 1%

King Estates

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 685

50% eligible for free lunch

4% with limited proficiency in English



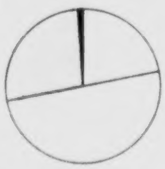
African-American 93%
Asian 2%
Latino 4%
White 1%

Roosevelt

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: 1,039

65% eligible for free lunch

57% with limited proficiency in English



African-American 22%
Asian 50%
Latino 27%
White and
Native American 1%

Notes: Data based on 1992-1993 school year. Students whose annual family incomes were $18,135 or less (for a family of four) qualified for free lunch. This income level, determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is 130% of the poverty level, and is the same requirement for all students across the continental United States.

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up in discussion unless it was about the few high-performing students whom teachers in distressed schools dote on. At the time the project began, few, if any, urban districts in the country supported a clear vision for middle-grades education, much less a special commitment to reforming middle-grades schools.

The Program for Disadvantaged Youth of the Clark Foundation decided to focus its resources on the middle grades in urban districts because these years are so crucial to youngsters and so little was being done. The districts' plans and pledges—not those of individual schools—provided the basis for the selection of five cities: Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego. This emphasis on involving systems became very important later. For the most part, the districts picked the neediest schools to participate, those with a high number of poor families and with low levels of student achievement. Two schools each in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and San Diego, and three schools in Louisville and Oakland formed the network.

These have been tumultuous—as well as frustrating and invigorating—years for the 12 schools.

These have been tumultuous—as well as frustrating and invigorating—years for the 12 schools. The banner of the initiative (displayed literally in many of their hallways) called on the schools to focus on three "highs"—high expectations, high content, and high support. If the schools truly put good reforms into place around these three highs, then, according to the project's goals, certain outcomes would be expected:

✓ Students would complete the middle grades on time.

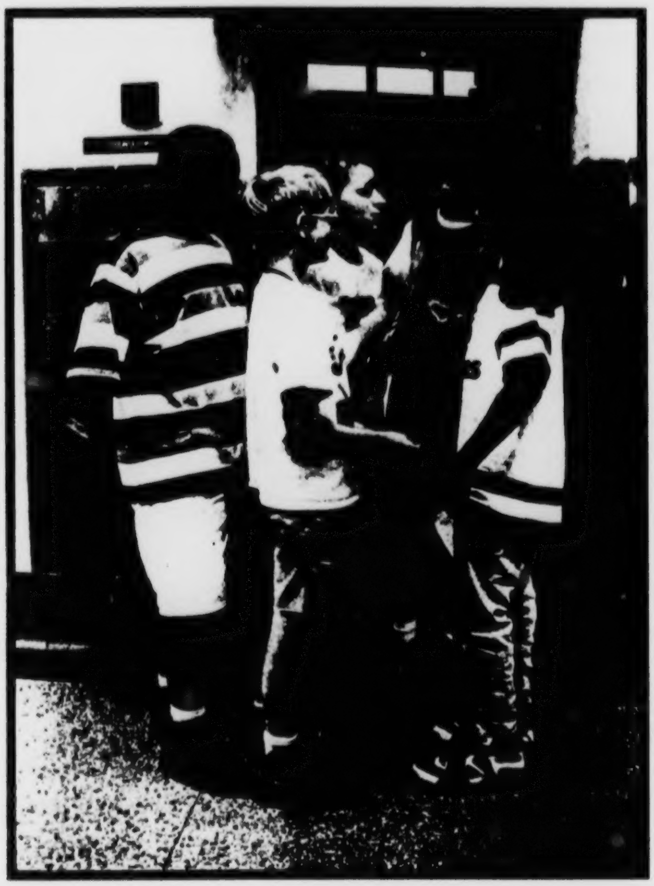
✓ Students would show mastery of higher-order reasoning, thinking and comprehension skills.

✓ Students would show improved self-esteem and attitudes toward school because of regular and supportive interactions with adults.

✓ Students would select curricula based on an understanding of how such choices affect their careers and/or post-secondary options.

These objectives are quite clear. It is also obvious now that both the schools and the districts initially underestimated the depth of change expected of them. Accustomed to separate and usually unrelated programs dropping in and out of their environments through grants or special district initiatives, they developed a variety of discrete activities—more field trips, for example, or staff development for new curricular strategies, or stipends for teachers to develop an add-on advisory curriculum. It was sort of "business as usual," with a few extras thrown in. True, the amount of funding

The initiative focused on middle grades in urban districts because these years are so crucial to youngsters and so little was being done. Western students gather in the hallway.



from the Foundation often paled in comparison to other outside sources, such as federally funded Chapter I programs for schools with large numbers of poor children. Over the four years of the initiative, the five cities have shared about $4 million in direct funding from the Foundation, compared to many millions of dollars available to the schools from Chapter I (except in Baltimore, where all Chapter I funds go to elementary schools). Yet the Foundation monies came as unfettered discretionary resources–a pot that could be spent as schools saw fit so long as the investments contributed to the objectives.

As described in *Gaining Ground*, the Foundation's 1991 book on the first two years of this effort, the schools spent much time in the beginning mushing around with change. A parade of outside resource people offered by the Foundation came through the buildings; most of these provided staff development to help start changes in curricula or new supports for students.

Students in the five cities coped with increasing poverty, violence, and anger in their families and communities. Principal Frances Ellington, right, at Calverton Middle School worries about safety within and without the school. Roosevelt Junior High in Oakland, below, feels like a sanctuary behind bars.

Technical assistance tailored to the needs of each school was provided through the Urban Youth Initiative at the Center for Early Adolescence in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, funded by the Foundation. In some instances, these resources were premature, arriving before the schools were convinced they really needed to change more than superficially. Moreover, with no structure to wed all of these ideas into a vision for the school, they became project-oriented or experiments dependent upon the enthusiasm of individual teachers.

Excessive turnover among teachers and administrators further hindered the chances for fundamental reforms to gain a toehold. Two years into the initiative, some of the central offices were in as much, if not worse, turmoil as they were before it began.

Nevertheless, teachers' attitudes about what was possible had begun to improve in most of the schools. Students and parents became more engaged in the school environment. Activities were giving way to a consensus that school-wide reform was needed. The schools were gaining ground on problems that, in the past, had immobilized them.

Now, four years after these 12 middle-grades schools signed on to this process, what has really changed? What have they—and those watching them—learned?

They had no models for large-scale systemic change. The usefulness of a model is questionable anyway because although it may be facile to say each school is unique, in fact all schools are. Within this network of 12 schools and five cities, there are great variations in the school populations (from predominantly white to all African-American), size (from 500 students to more than 1,800), leadership capabilities, stability (from the same principal to three in four years), and systemic support.

However, when the network's principals and teachers gather together from different parts of the country to talk with each other, they don't have to explain fundamentals. They know what it is like to teach in a school where high percentages of students–in some, almost all–live in urban poverty. And to do so within large and frequently unresponsive bureaucracies. They talk from frustrating experience about how very hard it is to change. They don't have silver bullets to offer. What they accomplished in four years took a long time to figure out and sometimes evolved from mistakes.

It is the common themes that frame the observations that are highlighted in this book. They are not conclusions, because the process begun in these schools is not over–nor should it ever be. They are not recommendations–it is presumptuous to assume an "outsider" can ever learn enough about a group of schools to be able to tell it what to do. These are impressions and perhaps some lessons, with enough universality to be useful for urban middle schools anywhere that want their students to go on with self-confidence to high school, prepared for all options.

What these 12 schools accomplished in four years took a long time to figure out and sometimes evolved from mistakes.

...After Four Years of Trying to Change

One context is pervasive and so overwhelming that you wonder, "How can they–students and teachers–manage to get through each day?" **The conditions with which the young students in the Clark schools must cope grew worse during the time the schools were trying to make better futures for them.** The evils bred by poverty–violence, anger in families, hopelessness–became much more evident in the schools, even compared to only two years ago. *Gaining Ground*, for example, tells of the efforts of Frances Ellington, Calverton's principal, to garner community help so that her students could walk safely to and from school. Two years later, when she felt "we were having our best year yet," a school employee was murdered in a classroom, forcing her to focus her energies on making the faculty and students feel safe *inside* the building.

Grieving for students killed outside of school is not an uncommon school function in the 1990s; but at one Oakland school, it was for a student found dead on school grounds. So far, the principals in these 12 schools have only taken away knives from students; they dread what they consider the inevitable, when they confiscate guns. When they entered teaching, these professionals probably thought the tool they would rely on the most would be an overhead projector or even a computer. But with them all of the time now is a military import, the walkie-talkie, which interrupts thoughts and conversations with relayed messages about potential disruptions and dangers in the school.

When they entered teaching, these professionals probably thought the tool they would rely on the most would be an overhead projector or even a computer.

Follow Skip Clemons around for a few hours. As principal of Southern Middle School in Louisville, he wants to use his skills to guide teachers on instruction, but he rarely has time. He is the supreme hall cop, not because he likes that role, but because his students have figured him out. Clemons is stern but accessible—he listens, he cajoles, he hugs. Desperate for attention, students pelter him with small misbehaviors or complaints, just so he will spend a few minutes with them.

Across town at Western Middle School, Ron Barber, experienced, tough, a leader among the Clark principals, hung up his hat at the end of the fourth year of the Clark project. "Lord, I'm tired," he said, tired of breaking up fights (sometimes instigated by parents), tired of protecting his teachers from angry families, tired of losing good teachers to schools where the community will respect them. Yet Barber's time at Western made him more sensitive. "All of us educated suburbanites say we know what is happening to kids in poverty, but it is easy for us to turn our heads," he says. "When you are here in this school and someone walks up and asks for $5 so the family can eat tonight, or a kid asks for help because she is being sexually molested by a family member, then you have to get down from the tiers and into the arena."

In this four-year period, the students' families became even poorer. In San Diego, for example, the number of students eligible for subsidized meals increased from 42% to more than 50%; and the number of limited-English proficient students just in middle schools, primarily low-income new immigrants, nearly doubled.

It is a tribute to these schools that most made a positive difference in the lives of their students while those lives were growing more chaotic. Most of the teachers and administrators held their ground, kept working with new ideas, and didn't retreat behind the excuse that their students' mounting problems kept them from trying. If you walk through the hallways and talk to the teachers today, you will still get the sense of a race against time. But most may be winning it.

In addition to more distressed students, the schools have juggled problems created by drastic budget cuts (in all cities except Louisville) and changing eligibility for school-wide Chapter I programs. Not knowing how much money or what staff would be available from one year to the next, sometimes from one month to another—only knowing resources would always be cut back—made sane planning impossible.

Nevertheless, these schools, mired in low expectations set by adults for students and for themselves, achieved something remarkable. **In almost every school, teachers will tell you they have come to truly believe that their students can learn at a high level and that they have**

Skip Clemons, right, principal of Southern Middle School in Louisville, is the supreme hall cop. He is stern, but accessible; students pelt him with small misbehaviors or complaints, just to get a few minutes with him.

gained new skills to teach them. This seems simple and obvious, but it is a state of mind that wasn't there before, except in a few teachers who were frequently isolated from the culture of the school because of their high expectations.

There are many ways of explaining why this changed, the most important of which is that this belief was nurtured and given time to evolve. The premise of the Clark initiative is that students living in poverty will begin to have options only when their academic achievement improves significantly. Higher student performance is the bottom line of school reform generally, but in urban schools as accustomed to failure as those in the Clark network, changes in teacher attitudes and expectations have to precede changes in student performance.

Math teacher Bill Compton, at Oakland's Frick Junior High School, believes all children can learn well, "even if society doesn't believe that."

Few realized how important this was before they started trying to create better places for youngsters. Nor did they fully realize how down-hearted they were. A consultant from the Center for Early Adolescence, assigned to the Oakland schools two years after the initiative began, found that, first, "these teachers needed to be healed." Mounds of resources, reading, and staff development are not as important as that "teaching" moment, that exhilarating point at which teachers realize the changes they made also changed their students' learning. They could see the students becoming more engaged in classwork, see them show new-found abilities.

This evolution takes time, time for individual teachers afraid of "losing control" to learn that their classrooms could become mutual places for learning, time for schools tied to traditional routines and low self-esteem to get excited about working with strong content or new ways of supporting students. At the end of four years, higher student achievement was just beginning to emerge in many of the schools. In most of them, however, higher teacher morale and skills–and commitment to making sure their students did not fail–were obvious.

Except at one school that shifted from a junior high to a middle grades organization (Muirlands in San Diego), this transformation took place in schools tied to existing structures. Principals in this network have little leeway over selection or retention of teachers. They work with what they've got. Similarly, teachers must work with what they've got–overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and no time in the traditional schedule to do much more than get through the day as they always have. When the Clark initiative began, these were not environments where suggesting change was rewarded.

When the initiative began, these were not environments where suggesting change was rewarded.

Because of the initiative, curriculum experts came to the schools to demonstrate their ideas. At network meetings and at meetings of the National Middle School Association, teachers and administrators learned what other schools were doing. **Leadership for change began to emerge from faculties that previously seemed hell-bent on sticking to the status quo.** Often it was an enthusiastic teacher who grabbed hold of a compelling idea and ran with it, seeking ways to learn as much as possible and becoming a trainer of others. In the past, these were lone rangers. Now they could organize a posse and recruit new members.

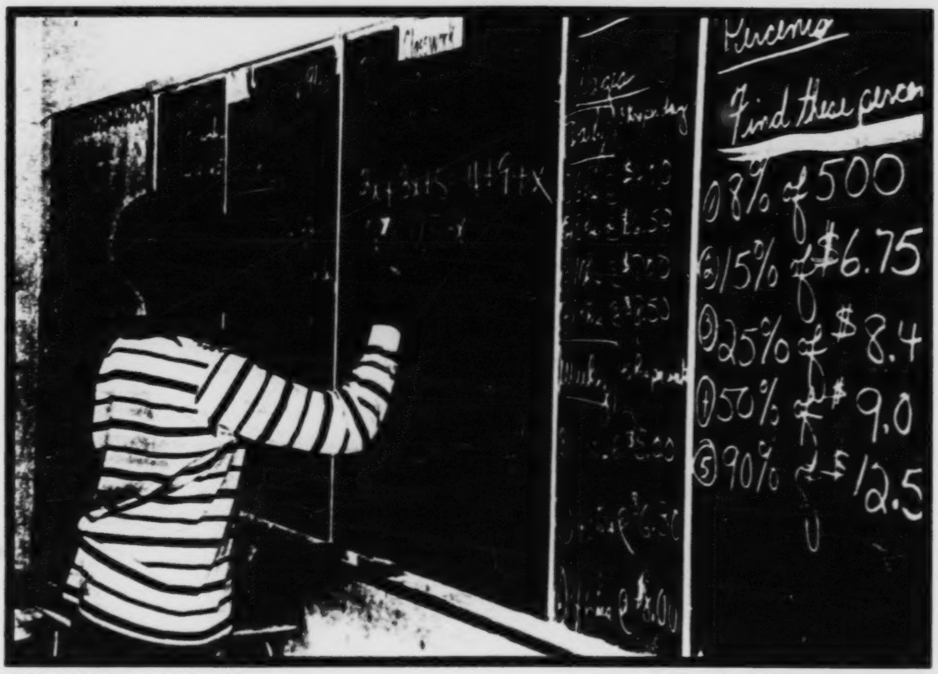
Even so, their efforts eventually had to become part of the school's evolving vision and plans–and their opportunities for staff development shared–in order for the ideas to stick. This is the second most important happening for teachers and administrators in these four years–**they developed more cohesive relationships that led to agreed-upon goals.** Having a shared vision was not given much attention at the beginning of the initiative. For the 12 Clark schools, a sense of shared mission evolved from teachers' experiences and from the planning required for grant renewals. The move to advisory periods for students and to team structures brought teachers closer together on planning and discussions about students. Teachers who had been left out of core planning, such as elective subject teachers or those in bilingual programs, were brought into the fold.

Students who used to sit silent, their arms folded with an "I-dare-you-to-teach-me" look, are jostling to get to blackboards.

Research tells us that teachers have not been educated to teach today's students, but that they can be successful if they change their strategies. Teachers are unsuccessful when they cling to traditional teaching methods or lower their expectations. However, according to the research, teachers can make these changes if they become part of a professional learning community within their schools, one in which teachers are learners and supporters of each other in changing environments. The Clark schools found this out on their own, although it took some of them a long time to realize it. Teachers and principals in these schools will admit that not all teachers have bought into changing their practice—some never will—but in most of them, there are enough renewed teachers to tip the school toward a mission of change.

Did these efforts have measurable results with students? Yes, although not as much as originally anticipated. But then, no one realized how difficult it would be to make education truly challenging for impoverished urban youth. **Student achievement improved in one-half of the schools, and students indicated in many ways other than test scores that they were being encouraged by the school changes around them.** Anecdotes abound in the Clark schools about students who are—finally—engaged in learning. Students who used to sit silent, their arms folded with an "I-dare-you-to-teach-me" look about them, are jostling to get to blackboards to explain how they solved a math word problem. Their talents are being recognized in city and state contests. In some places, they are more serious about homework.

Surveys conducted by the Clark Foundation's evaluators, the Education Resources Group, found that students became more satisfied with the quality of school life over time. More students expected to enroll in a college prep or academic program in high school, although the total among the schools was still low (28%). In Louisville and Milwaukee, for example, more students were applying to academic magnet schools; one middle school



Algebra quickly moved to the top of the priority list for students in the Clark schools. A Calverton student in Baltimore tests his skills.

had graduates who applied for the first time. And students in Louisville and San Diego did as well or better than the aggregate national sample on a critical thinking test administered by ERG.

Most schools reported lower absenteeism among both students and teachers, and fewer students were retained or suspended. Before the initiative began, Hispanic students at one of the network schools in San Diego scored below the district average in all academic subjects—reading, math, history, science, and writing. By the end of the 1991-92 school year, they scored above the district average in all subjects. In Louisville, the 1991-92 averages were not high, but every school could see steady progress in math and reading. They were heartened by data showing they scored higher on the Kentucky assessments than did their feeder schools. In 1992-93, scores continued to improve, particularly in reading and writing.

Before the initiative, the 12 network schools did not pay much attention to test data because, in most instances, they did not feel responsible for them. Standardized achievement scores are usually reported too late for the current staff to look at them and say "these are my students." Nor were the schools inclined to look at other indicators, such as retentions and absenteeism, as parts of a whole pattern. Not until the schools began to develop a consensus about where they wanted to go would they be motivated to determine where they were.

Two other incentives came along. In several of the districts, either state or district-wide goals and new accountability systems imposed responsibility for outcomes on the schools. In addition, the Clark Foundation began to encourage schools to conduct their own assessments of programs, not only to collect data, but also to get involved in analyzing and acting upon the information.

From the beginning, the Clark initiative maintained that families must be part of the renewal. Parent involvement is a two-tiered challenge for urban middle schools. Generally, family involvement drops off when students move from elementary to middle school. In the Clark schools, many families had never been involved in meaningful ways, and, from all perceptions, didn't want to be. An additional complicating factor is that few of the schools draw the majority of their enrollment from their immediate neighborhoods; at one school, one-third of the students voluntarily ride buses an hour each way to attend what their parents consider a better school than the local one.

Surveys showed that students became more satisfied with the quality of school life. Students at Mann Middle School juggle paperwork and lunch.

In three of the five cities, the Clark initiative funded local groups to pull parents into the life of the schools and of their children's education. A national group, Effective Parenting Information for Children (EPIC), provided the core activity in a fourth district. These were not the usual get-out-the-PTA attendance campaigns. Parent coordinators went door to door, set up parent centers in schools, enticed parents into schools with awards programs and adult courses, and organized alumni to support their alma maters. Along the way, the efforts helped convince teachers that parents are their allies. The schools learned that **nontraditional efforts that empower parents as well as their children can successfully tie schools and homes together**. This takes intensive work and comes about slowly; and it cannot be measured by such traditional benchmarks as increases in attendance at meetings. Enlisting families is more subtle than that, and as with teachers, is a matter of first changing attitudes–attitudes toward schools and toward parents' own ability to help their children.

Finally, did the Clark initiative create systemic middle-grades reform in the districts? Or did the 12 schools' efforts remain isolated and atypical? It took a lot of pushing and pulling of central offices to get them to use the initiative as a base for systemic reform, and there were frustrations on all sides. But at the end of four years, reforming the middle grades had become a district priority, even if only on paper in some cities. The two districts best organized for restructuring before the initiative began–Louisville and San Diego–had the most to show. **However, in all of the districts, a few middle-grades schools working in depth on reforms provided the leverage for change across the district.**

Not until the schools began to develop a consensus about where they wanted to go would they be motivated to determine where they were.

Central offices suffered as much from turnover and instability as did the schools. Their agendas were full of more immediate problems, such as slashed funding, statewide assessments, or requirements to flesh out their own improvement plans. At first, the initiative was just one more program; some central offices felt their involvement ended once they had been assured of the grant, except, perhaps, for appointing a committee and writing quarterly reports.

However, they all gradually included middle grades reform as a priority. As one Baltimore principal observed in the spring of 1993: "The central office is just now going through what we did–creating a vision for a middle school."

These accomplishments were not small ones, even though they were unevenly attained across the schools and districts. They offer much hope, especially for the students and families in these schools and those who come after them. They are inspiration for urban middle-grades schools facing the same challenges. And some are models for urban districts that need others to show them how large bureaucracies can shape substantive reforms.

The accomplishments–and struggles–are best told through stories from teachers, schools, and districts.

The Schools

Next to such books as *Thriving on Chaos* and *Supermanaging* in the principal's office at Western Middle School in Louisville is a small, colorful sign–"A Middle School is a Building That Has Four Walls and the Future Inside."

Sentimental perhaps, but it illustrates that schools, as buildings and institutions, cannot be separated from the people inside them. So when one talks about *what schools have done* or *the school culture*, the reference is essentially about the collective actions of those in the building. In the first four years of the Clark initiative, the 12 schools became changed institutions, much more than a compendium of personal renewals. What happened to these schools affected all of the people in them, and nowhere was that more apparent than at Muirlands Middle School in San Diego.

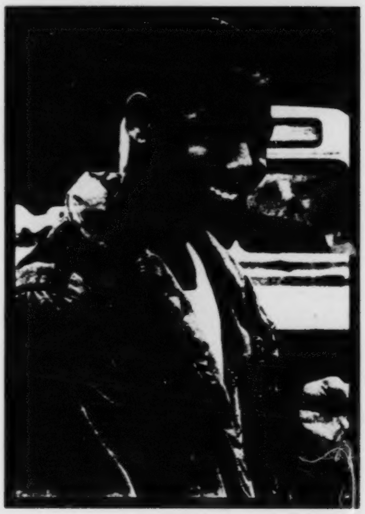
Where All Students Became Gifted

Muirlands' two-year plan, submitted to the Clark Foundation in 1989, seemed ambitious. The school was moving from a junior high to a middle school organization; it wanted to do so with the right principles and with built-in consideration of the students from Barrio Logan. About one-third of the student body participates in a voluntary desegregation plan, spending an hour to cross town from the largely Hispanic neighborhood of Barrio Logan to Muirlands, an affluent hillside school overlooking the surfing beaches at La Jolla, where the children are, without much exaggeration, all above average.

For years the Barrio students had been largely ignored. Their enrollment kept Muirlands from being closed down, but they were not considered part of the La Jolla culture. Tracking was visibly obvious. The regular classes

The Clark initiative provided:

- ✓ Resources that ranged from new curricular choices to on-site technical assistance.
- ✓ Extensive staff training.
- ✓ Exposure to ideas, people, and resources through national meetings and site visits.
- ✓ Leadership training for principals.
- ✓ Five-year funding commitment from the Clark Foundation with a renewal process requiring schools to assess, revise, and plan ahead.
- ✓ Support for local groups or initiatives, especially parents and the business community.
- ✓ Ongoing outside evaluation.



Each school became better at:

- ✓ Developing collaboratively a vision for what it wanted students to know and be able to do, outcomes not limited by preconceptions about what students could do. (School-based decisionmaking was not a named objective of the initiative, but it became an inevitable one.)
- ✓ Integrating data and assessments into decisionmaking. Few of the schools initially paid much attention to the scanty and outdated information available to them. With better data and self-assessment training, they began to improve their efforts—and accept accountability for the results.
- ✓ Acting for the benefit of the whole. Divided for so many years by categorical programs or special needs groups, these urban schools began to see themselves as a single unit, working toward common goals. Teachers learned to converse, plan, and evaluate across disciplines; bilingual programs became equal partners; arts and industrial arts became part of the regular curriculum teams.
- ✓ Analyzing their use of time—and changing it. From conversion to year-round schooling, to extended days, to planning time for interdisciplinary teams, the schools began to shake off the constrictions of traditional ideas about how to use time, making it bend to their purposes.
- ✓ Feeling important and tied to communities. In addition to better contacts with parents or community supports, the schools found themselves recognized and valued as leaders in middle school reform. It was a subtle but important shift for schools accustomed to always being at the bottom.

popular
self esteem
hard work
goal
simile/metaphor
imagery

At Muirlands, gifted classes used to contain almost all white students. By 1993-1994, almost all sixth and seventh graders–white and Hispanic–were in gifted classes.

held almost all brown faces; the cluster classes for the gifted, almost all white. The new Muirlands plan promised to modify the curriculum "to increase opportunities for students to succeed," help the staff implement middle level concepts, give students more recognition. But *nowhere* did it talk about detracking the curriculum. No way. Not in La Jolla.

By the beginning of the 1993-94 school year, the sixth and seventh grades at Muirlands were almost totally untracked; and the eighth grade "was getting ready to go," according to teacher Carol Barry, a leader in moving to heterogeneous groups in the sixth grade. Muirlands even went a step beyond untracking: all students were in *gifted* classes.

This almost incredible transformation took place because teachers realized that timid efforts to achieve higher academic performance weren't working for all students. And they had a parent problem–from two directions. Barrio parents, coming together because a parent coordinator offered training through the Clark-funded program, were beginning to criticize the low expectations their children found at Muirlands. At the same time, although a few La Jolla parents were uncomfortable with the obvious segregation of students, no one wanted to chance what might be perceived as lowering the very high standards demanded by local parents.

In the summer of 1991, the sixth-grade teachers, all of them certified to teach the gifted, decided together to move to heterogeneous grouping, keeping the strategies and standards of gifted education intact for all students. They began by detracking the humanities curriculum in their individual classrooms, then moved to two-teacher teams. After a full year of this arrangement, the teachers overcame some La Jolla parent concerns and began the 1993-94 year with plans to gradually detrack math classes also. The same pattern was followed by the seventh grade, detracking in the humanities first. In 1993, a few students are still grouped for certain classes–a seminar for the highly gifted enrolls less than 40 sixth graders out of about 250; and a bilingual teacher works with about 20 Hispanic students, using identical texts in either Spanish or English and helping students carry out classroom projects with their peers. Otherwise, all students are receiving the regular gifted education. This means, says Barry, that there is less emphasis upon drill and rote learning and more attention to hands-on activities, portfolio assessments, cooperative grouping, and higher-order thinking. Having students from different backgrounds work together in groups allows them to use their strengths, she says. When Barry's class wrote a radio play, students from the Barrio shined as storytellers collaborating with their peers on grammar. An assignment to write a letter to the mayor or the Chamber of Commerce about border crossings stimulated classroom discussions in which Barrio students challenged stereotypes held by the La Jolla group.

An assignment to write a letter to the mayor about border crossings stimulated classroom discussions in which Barrio students challenged stereotypes held by the La Jolla group.

Even though the Barrio students come from feeder elementary schools "where they were not exposed to the really thinking kind of work we do," says Barry, "they are very good at it." Of her 70 sixth graders in 1992-93, "all but two or three did very well." In mid-spring, two-thirds of the sixth-grade Barrio students were maintaining a grade-point average of C or above, despite–or because of–high academic expectations. Writing to Learn, a program that encourages students to "take charge" of their learning by managing writing portfolios, reflecting on their writing, and setting goals, was especially helpful in moving the Barrio students into more advanced work. Through an emphasis on writing, "students found they could be successful," Barry adds. "They became more at ease." These are students who, at the beginning of the year, protested that they did not belong in gifted classes. "We told them this is where they should be," she says.

The enthusiasm of the teachers for heterogeneous grouping is now "absolute," and, according to Muirland's principal Cassandra Countryman, was the critical factor in gaining acceptance from La Jolla parents. "When you hear teachers describe it, you hear their genuineness." Countryman acknowledges that Muirlands' teachers know content well, an advantage not available in many urban schools. Even so, the teachers' greatest regret is that they did not make the change sooner.

Cat Xander, the central office liaison with the two Clark schools in San Diego, believes Muirlands would not have detracked without outside help. None of the other schools in San Diego with socio-economic profiles similar to Muirlands "have even touched this issue," according to Xander, despite a district-wide commitment to eliminate tracking and to close the achievement gap everywhere.

Instead of being an anomaly, detracking has become a passion among many in the Clark schools.

The Clark initiative provided consultants to work with teachers, people like Anne Wheelock. Her research across the country on heterogeneous grouping has been sponsored by Clark and published as a book, *Crossing the Tracks*, by The New Press. Teachers who met over the summer to plan for the new grouping received stipends from Clark funds. Charles Palmer, an experienced urban principal who is a local consultant for the Center for Early Adolescence, followed up on visits by the Center staff with ideas and resources to shape Muirlands' detracking effort. Moreover, Muirlands teachers talked with others in the Clark five-city network who accepted heterogeneous grouping as not only desirable, but as truly necessary. Instead of being an anomaly, detracking has become a passion among many in the Clark schools.

Detracking is only one achievement in Muirlands' transformation. Even though the new grouping of students had begun, in the spring of 1992, Barrio parents demonstrated at the central office, charging that some policies and teachers discriminated against their children. Instead of polarizing the school, the event helped to create a more positive learning place for all students.

"We didn't see the problem coming," admits Countryman. The teachers were taken aback by the charges, but they took them seriously, asking for mediation by the Home-School Partnership, a coalition of parent and advocacy groups funded by the Clark Foundation. Over the summer, teachers, parents, and administrators worked together on a plan that addressed student mediation, parent networks, and cultural diversity. As a result of the summer planning, a new student forum is composed of students elected from advisories, giving Barrio students more opportunities to be involved in student leadership. And the Hispanic Leadership Club sponsored dances and promoted the idea for a colorful mural across a courtyard wall. Students and parents from the Barrio have been added to the school's Governance Council, parenting classes are being held alternately at Muirlands and at a school in the Barrio, and "graduation" for the parent classes took place at Muirlands for the first time.

Parents and teachers agree that the most important challenge at Muirlands is to close the achievement gap between La Jolla and Barrio students.

The parents continued to meet. The heart of the Muirlands change became an agreement by both groups of parents that the most important issue is closing the achievement gap between the Barrio and the La Jolla students. This goal unified them. Parents identified specific areas where work was needed–communication, expectations, parent training, resources, cultural diversity, and learning styles. They laid out what was expected of schools and of themselves.

Starting with a great deal of mistrust, the process led to fundamental changes in understanding. Countryman knew barriers had come down when one Barrio parent, with total honesty, asked the La Jolla members of the planning group: "What are you doing to help your kids that we are not doing?"

In the classrooms, teachers now look for ways to help students express diversity. After reading *Walkabout*, for example, an Australian novel about a British brother and sister who are aided by an Aboriginal boy, students were assigned a writing task: they were to pretend they were the Englishman, now 40, explaining to his own child what happened in this adventure and stressing the cultural context of the novel.

In years past, Barrio and La Jolla students instinctively separated themselves at lunchtime in the school's courtyards. Now, students mingle more, playing board games together or visiting the computer lab. Earlier in the 1992-93 school year, all students selected a classmate who was not from their community and interviewed them over lunch. "This was very revealing," Countryman says. "Some students learned of classmates who go home to maids; others learned that their classmates have to cut through parks to avoid streets where they might get killed by random gunfire."

Perhaps the most telling sign of the culture change at Muirlands belongs to the parents. Their traditional fund-raiser, a dinner dance in the La Jolla style, was replaced by an international food fair and auction.

A Somali student in San Diego represents only one of Mann Middle School's 30 language groups

Prepared for the Next Wave

Some education reformers stamp "finished" when much of the decision-making is turned over to the school site by the central office, believing teaching and learning will be renewed because teachers and administrators are freed up to make it so. On paper, however, this is a shell. Decisions must be *informed and knowledgeable* to build new structures; they must flow from genuine involvement within a school community, not from a committee that mimics the top-down system it was supposed to replace.

With 100 teachers and more than 1,800 students, San Diego's Horace Mann Middle School could have resembled a little bureaucracy when it reorganized–top-down management, lots of middle-level managers between teachers and the principal, no real accountability at any level. Ten miles and a world of difference away from Muirlands, Mann had enough problems to deal with without worrying about a new governance structure. For example, between 1989, when the school started its Clark activities, and 1993, its enrollment increased by 800. The redrawing of boundaries within the district shifted large numbers of limited-English-speaking students to the school, from about 450 in 1989 to approximately 1,200 during the 1993-94 school year. Mann juggles 30 language groups; the newest is an influx of about 200 Somali students. "We're waiting for the Bosnians" has become sort of a mantra for the faculty.

Mann Middle School is on guard against neighborhood gang activity disrupting their campus-like setting, but "kids are happy when they're here," says a vice principal.

Even though the school is on guard against neighborhood gang activity entering its campus-like setting, "kids are happy when they are here," observed Julie Martel, a Mann vice principal. A Cinco de Mayo celebration was underway during lunch period as she talked, and Hispanics, African-Americans, Laotians and Somalis alike were swinging at piñatas hanging from trees or dancing to salsa music blaring across the courtyard.

This is a school that could have gone under in a big way, considering its overcrowding, its extreme diversity, and budget cutbacks that stripped it of supports, such as extra counselors, to deal with the growth. But this is a school that faced up to the problems, changed its governance structure, and became a place where teachers, too, tend to be happy.

Julie Elliott became principal at Mann at just about the time its enrollment exploded. She has a cheerleader quality about her–a useful outlook that has helped her staff through many problems. But she also came with traditional ideas about principal leadership–it was her job, she thought, to ferret out the good ideas, persuade the staff to try them, and find the resources to support them.

Today, Elliott chuckles that she "doesn't run this school anymore." Her role has changed, and although "it takes longer to get things done, there is more buy-in because the decisions are those of the teachers." She even detects occasional anger "when they can't blame me" for the impact of their decisionmaking.

The new governance structure has involved more people in "shaping the school climate," says math teacher Nancy Crouse. Though reorganized as a middle school in the mid-1980s, Mann "was sort of a junior high with enhancements," she explains. Now, primarily because many staff members have garnered ideas from other schools in the Clark network, "we are becoming a true middle school."

Mann principal Julie Elliott greets parents. This very diverse, very large school "has become parent friendly," she says.

Because of the governance changes, Mann has moved farther than Elliott could have imagined. Teacher-run committees designed a new weekly schedule; voted to keep the school open year round; strengthened interdisciplinary teaching; and moved to divide the large student body into smaller "houses," with bilingual programs included in each house.

Elliott still supervises budget and personnel decisions–"these are time-consuming, and teachers don't want to take them on"–but the rest of the work is done through committees. Wednesday ends at noon for students. After eating lunch together, teachers spend the afternoon doing committee work–departments meet every other week, different committees on the intervening weeks. All committees are represented on a steering committee that meets after school hours on Wednesdays. Until the reorganization, "no one cared about what committees did," Elliott believes. Now, important decisions are made by the steering committee–from approving requests for field trips to deciding on the priorities for staff development–"so teachers are getting serious about the process."

Mann principal Julie Elliott admits she "doesn't run this school anymore." And although "it takes longer to get things done, there is more buy-in because the decisions are those of the teachers."

Teachers took the lead in shaping a school-wide Chapter I plan to match their proposals in the Clark grant and the district priority on language acquisition. To boost interdisciplinary teaching, the teachers moved toward combining periods (block scheduling) in order to give more time for teaching two subjects together. Field trips, funded mostly by the Clark grant, must be tied into interdisciplinary themes, the teachers decided. Their most important decision, however, was to apply to run the school year round, not so much because of overcrowding, but because they decided this would be best for the students. "The school will never be shut down," explains Elliott. With intercessions lasting only three to five weeks, the usual summer learning loss will be eliminated, a particular benefit for the limited-English-speaking students whose language skills usually slipped during the three-month break. Teachers also prepare previews so that students can come to school up to four hours a day during their intercessions to catch up or to find out what will be studied in the next nine weeks. The school is also working with community groups to expand out-of-school enrichment activities for students.

The Mann staff wanted many more parents involved in the school, an awesome task considering the multiple languages and cultures represented in the school. The Home-School Partnership program, supervised by the June Burnett Institute at San Diego State University, took over the school's career center and turned it into a parent center. Parent volunteers now help teachers in classrooms, translate for them, and accompany field trips.

Parents also attend language classes at the school.

Cat Xander, liaison to the school from the central office, credits outside support for keeping Mann's head above the water. "The situation there is so tough that if the grant had not bought them staff development, they would be just living day by day. They wouldn't have tried interdisciplinary teaming, they wouldn't have ambitious plans for next year, they would not have made concrete efforts at parent involvement," she says.

What Mann needed–and found–"was time to think."

At first, the schools didn't know what to do with assessment data. They didn't have the skills to look at the outcomes and determine what needed to be changed and how.

Seeing Ourselves.....

Gaining Ground, the Clark Foundation book on the first two years of reform, found a universal shortcoming among the 12 schools. Staff did not know how to collect and analyze data about how the school was doing. Standardized test results usually came from central offices after the students had moved on to another teacher, another school. When other indicators such as retentions and suspensions were reported, they mostly served as comparisons. "At least, we are not as bad off as (blank) school," a staff analysis might conclude. Programs were adopted and institutionalized without ever examining their worth.

Real assessment of the status quo is a school-wide function, not that of a principal or a single committee. So is action based on the assessment. By 1993, the Clark schools began to understand this. Several incentives converged on the middle schools in this project at about the same time.

"Assessment" was added to the vocabulary of teachers on an almost daily basis, particularly in Kentucky. With penalties and incentives focused on individual schools under Kentucky's landmark Education Reform Act, "our anxiety levels went up," commented Cheryl DeMarsh, principal at Louisville's Iroquois Middle School. The law set a specific timeline for improvement. Teachers began analyzing data, not only of their own school but also of feeder schools. Another Louisville principal, Skip Clemons at Southern, found his teachers studying the assessment scores of feeder schools and deciding that "we have to start working hard with students when they come in and not wait until the eighth-grade state assessments."

Early on in the Clark initiative, some schools had conducted self-studies using the Middle Grades Assessment Program, developed some years ago by the Center for Early Adolescence. It is a check on the status quo that

At West Baltimore Middle School, teachers assessed their cooperative learning skills, calculating how much time students spent working together in groups.

involves surveys of teachers, parents, and students, culminating in setting priorities for integrating middle-school components.

At the same time, assessment of progress came as part of the bargain with the Clark Foundation. Initially, this was primarily external, and outside evaluators from the New York City-based Education Resources Group made regular visits and phone calls to the schools; conducted student and teacher surveys; and collected data on various indicators, including academic achievement. Schools received annual summaries drawn from this information.

At first, the schools didn't know what to do with this data. They didn't have the skills to look at the outcomes and determine what needed to be changed and how. Nor would such skills seem important until some basics paved the way—a cohesive vision for what the school expected of students and the involvement of teachers in real decisionmaking for the school.

When these came into place, the assessment focus turned to the internal workings of the schools. Staff began to ask: "What are all these new programs contributing?" With so many pieces of reform growing up here and there throughout a school building, spurred most often by a few interested teachers or those from a single discipline, the schools needed to know what was working and why and whether or not the programs were supporting the school's goals for fundamental change.

From the beginning of the Clark project, Don Rollie, a consultant with the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education in Washington, D.C., had been helping the principals develop leadership skills through semi-annual workshops and advice-on-call. He walked principals through self-assessment strategies (with on-site training at some schools). The stage had been set for cross collaboration at an annual conference for teams from the Clark schools, organized by the Center for Early Adolescence, where teachers, principals, and district personnel worked on program assessment. Each staff then chose a focus for assessment. At Calverton Middle School in Baltimore and Kosciuszko Middle School in Milwaukee, survey data developed by teachers helped the schools revise their advisory programs. At West Baltimore Middle School, the school's strong emphasis upon cooperative learning received scrutiny, with teachers observing each other's classes to calculate just how much time students actually spent in cooperative learning and the depth of instruction they were receiving.

With so many pieces of reform growing up here and there throughout a school building, the schools needed to know what was working and why.

At Iroquois Middle School, the teachers decided to examine Writing to Learn (WTL), the one program that touched the whole school. Principal Cheryl DeMarsh felt that "too many bits and pieces were coming at everyone," but by tackling a thorough assessment of one program, teachers would be able to put the pieces together better.

WTL, one of the most popular of the curriculum resources introduced to the schools, uses multiple strategies to teach students to be better writers in all content areas. The teachers and principal put together an assessment team consisting of a reading specialist and two regular classroom teachers. Teachers trained in WTL and their students made observations, conducted surveys, and completed questionnaires. The team also compared scores of writing portfolios of eighth graders who had participated in WTL with those who had not.

About 180 students from all three grade levels were surveyed, revealing that students were familiar with the steps in WTL but still focused on the mechanics of writing rather than the content. Classroom observations told the team that student folders sometimes contained considerable variety, but this wasn't consistent across classrooms. The team took notes about student behavior and participation in the classrooms and interviewed

Iroquois Middle School principal Cheryl DeMarsh worked with teachers to assess their skills in Writing to Learn, a program that focuses on student writing across curriculum lines.

teachers who had received training in WTL.

The team reported its analysis in detail and suggested improvements, even making recommendations about literature sources teachers could read aloud so students would understand about variety in writing styles.

The study uncovered a welcome result that might not have been learned otherwise. In a math class, students were responding positively to writing explanations, although the teacher was not using WTL extensively. The students were applying writing skills learned in other classes, the team concluded. Because "interdisciplinary teaching and continuity are strongly encouraged at our middle school, we are so pleased to have made this discovery," they wrote in their final report.

The postscript to the assessment team's evaluation came in Kentucky's writing portfolio scores of eighth graders. The improvement was "dramatic," with the number at the apprentice level (middle performance) increasing by more than 100% in 1992.

Teachers assessing their peers is a risky step. The effort was possible at Iroquois because teachers "had gone through a lot of transformation already and felt positive about it," according to DeMarsh. Arriving at the school two years after the Clark initiative began, she found that teachers were open to opportunities to develop leadership and vision for the students. "When I need leadership," says the principal, "there are lots of places I can go. There are many, many people involved."

When all the World About You.....

Muirlands, Mann, and Iroquois Middle Schools, as the above profiles illustrate, were ready for change. Many urban schools, overcome with incredibly difficult problems, are not. They cannot stand clear of their problems long enough to grab hold of ideas; they cannot find the time to use the ideas, even though they may make great plans on paper.

"You can't just say 'change' and expect teachers to be able to do it," says Oakland consultant Bettye Haysbert.

This was the situation in one of the Oakland schools in the Clark network two years ago. Dutifully but with no enthusiasm for the task, teachers sat in the library after school to finish their required five-year improvement plan for the district. They were integrating it with the objectives of the Clark initiative, although many didn't know what those were. When words sounded as if they fit with the tasks described on their sheets, they wrote them down, signed off on the document, and probably immediately, forgot about it.

Change was not a priority for these teachers. Survival was. Seven permanent principals, and a few temporary ones, have headed the three Oakland schools in a four-year period. Until the current superintendent, Richard "Pete" Mesa, took over in 1990, the school system had gone through five superintendents in 10 years. Budget cutbacks, combined with investigations of misuse of funds, demoralized the school staff, already reeling from media and community belief that the city's schools were failures. These were schools on hold, dealing with student violence, slipping achievement, mounting social problems, and deteriorating physical facilities.

The Oakland plans submitted to the Clark project in 1989 and again in 1991 were perhaps the thickest of the five urban districts, but the achievements were among the least impressive. The three Clark schools, however, after resisting, stumbling, and almost giving up on change, may be finding a way out of their distress. When the 1993-94 school year began, Roosevelt, Frick, and King Estates Junior High Schools launched reform plans based on consensus among each school faculty about their vision and strategies. These were faculties known in the past for shouting at each other, certainly not for their collegiality and consensus-making.

This transformation took place because of the merger of several events. The school district decided to set specific goals and outcomes for students–Mesa's Five-Year Improvement Plan–and designated demonstration schools to start the process. With some persuasion, the central office chose the three Clark junior high schools to be among the demonstration schools,

Oakland schools faced budget cutbacks, deteriorating environmental conditions, and violence in the community, but these students from Frick Junior High show a spirit that can help them survive—and learn—against all odds.

although Mesa still had to personally convince one of them to participate. As demonstration schools, the faculty spent a school year studying various change models and selected one, or a combination, as their lever for school change.

When the process of selecting a model started, teachers still mistrusted it as just one more top-down move that would signify nothing in the long run. Bettye Haysbert, a seasoned educator hired as a local technical assistance coordinator by the Center for Early Adolescence, couldn't even get the teachers to meet together in the beginning. She began by "doing little things they wanted," such as producing resources immediately. "I had to show them that I could follow through; they had to see my competence."

Haysbert understood their cynicism, though. "They were expected to change, but had not been given much of an opportunity for input into the process." The planning process had been too top-down to get teacher buy-in. "You can't just say 'change' and expect them to be able to do it," says Haysbert. It may seem "ridiculous," she adds, but these schools need a lot of handholding. Past practice meant that as soon as the mandate to improve was written into a plan, it was shelved, and schools living from one crisis to another would simply revert to old routines. New routines, she says, must sufficiently replace the old ones before the hands can let go.

Haysbert did not tell school faculties what improvements they needed to make or how to achieve them. Rather, she asked questions about what they were doing and why. Gradually, the staff began to ask the same questions themselves. After establishing their trust, Haysbert helped the three faculties determine for themselves what they needed and to decide on solutions. After a year, true site-based development emerged, she says, and the faculties "are now able to ask themselves the same kinds of questions I asked initially." They are setting time lines, putting the right issues on agendas for site management committees. This would have been difficult for the schools to pull off without outside help, even though there was a growing sentiment among teachers that the school environment just had to get better, Haysbert believes.

Higher academic performance is the bottom line of school reform, but changes in teacher expectations for their students' success must come first. A Mann Middle School student learns to concentrate.

Continuing this evolution, the schools took a year to come to a schoolwide consensus on the change model they wanted as a demonstration school. Teachers researched the possibilities, visited sites, and questioned experts who came to the school. In May 1993, they voted: Frick selected Accelerated Schools, a high expectations and high involvement model developed by Henry Levin of Stanford University; King Estates chose the James Comer model, which emphasizes developmental support teams for students and parent involvement; and Roosevelt combined the Comer model with that of the Coalition of Essential Schools, which focuses on a common core of learning and teachers as coaches rather than lecturers.

While the schools were in the process of researching and selecting a model, small steps were beginning to bring the faculties together. The Algebra Project, for example, a program that uses cooperative learning to prepare minority students for advanced math, was adopted at King Estates, and teachers began to see its effects on student self-esteem and their willingness to tackle difficult material in other classes.

Roosevelt math teachers conducted a student survey that revealed to the whole staff the alienation and "aloneness" of most of their students. Only 17%, for example, felt safe at school all the time, 44% did not believe there was anyone at school whom they could talk to if they had a problem, 41% did not know anyone in their family or neighborhood who had graduated from college. With such statistics, how could anybody defend the status quo? Garnering funds from an environmental foundation, the Roosevelt staff decided to show students that they were serious about change. Roosevelt is an old, dismal building. In a weekend of work–involving teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members–the auditorium was painted, the piano refinished; and a bare courtyard, inviting only trash before, was transformed into a landscaped area with a colorful wall mural around the sides.

These may be cosmetic changes, but the spirit in which they were done indicate that the school was shaking off serious depression. Roosevelt's teachers were no longer putting each other down, most were becoming involved in committee work to carry out their plans, and expanded student support services were planned. The 1992 California achievement test results showed that Roosevelt had reason to be optimistic. Although scores had dipped somewhat in recent years (much less than the district average, though), Roosevelt was the only Oakland junior high school in 1992 to improve on all of the eighth grade subject matter tests since the tests began in the mid-1980s.

The Oakland schools need time. And only time will tell if the combination of outside help (the handholding) and an acknowledgment that there is nowhere to go but up will produce change. Much also depends upon the role of the central office. Yolanda Peeks, assistant superintendent who heads the Five-Year Plan activities and the middle school initiative, admits that change efforts, in the past, "were external and imposed." It is her philosophy–and the one now prevailing in the district–that "change has to come from within schools, and people in the schools can change themselves if you give them an opportunity to do so."

Only 17 percent of Roosevelt students felt safe at school all the time, and 41 percent did not know anyone in their family or neighborhood who had graduated from college.

TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

Imagine what it is like to be teaching in an urban middle school.

First of all, the neighborhoods fool you. Most of the schools in the Clark network seem to be nestled in placid residential areas, bordered by modest homes. Only from the front steps of a couple of the schools do you see the poverty that pervades the schools on the inside.

But ride the buses with the students, from neighborhoods overrun by squalor, where drug traders stand like heralds on street corners. There is little to come home to, few safe places to play or meet. Or walk several blocks behind Southern Middle School in Louisville to Churchhill Downs, a lure for students and their parents, both of whom bet on future jobs in the stables that don't require an education. Or sit with an attendance officer at Frick Junior High School in Oakland. If almost one-half of the students do not live with a biological parent, whom do you call? Who is responsible for this child?

At the beginning of the Clark initiative, teachers at several schools did ride a bus to the neighborhoods where their students lived. "I know teachers who would not give kids a pencil," says Susan Shortt, at Louisville's Iroquois Middle School. "But that bus trip was a real eye opener. They realized that it was lucky these kids walked in the door, much less that they brought a pencil with them." The same response can be heard from teachers at Calverton Middle School in Baltimore, where most students walk to school—and absenteeism is very high. "If you get up in the morning to get ready to come to a place where you're not doing well and you have to watch out for strangers who might slash your face to get your earrings as you walk to school, why bother?" asked one teacher.

The Clark initiative provided:

✓ Expert help in curriculum areas for teachers and principals.

✓ Followup on those opportunities through staff development on site and at other schools or workshops and meetings.

✓ Opportunities to create better support systems for urban young adolescents.

✓ An expanding support system for urban middle grades teachers, both within their own districts and across sites.

The major accomplishments included:

✓ A core group of teachers in most schools willing to change attitudes and teaching. Their numbers expanded, often to the point of being enough to form an overall vision and ethos for the school.

✓ Teachers who saw students respond positively to higher content and different teaching strategies. Teachers were thus motivated to try harder, learn more, and share more; many became trainers in the programs that sparked their interest.

✓ Networks of teachers that formed around mutual interests, such as curriculum development. In most situations, these networks led to greater accountability on the part of teachers and greater responsibility for overall school improvement.

✓ A rise in teachers' expectations of their own work. In addition to learning new classroom skills, many gained a sense of renewal about their profession.

✓ New skills for principals focused on instructional leadership, as well as the creation of a support group for each other, an especially helpful resource for this constantly changing membership. Principals became better analysts–of their own use of time, of school programs, of overall school change–and better able to guide newly empowered teachers toward meaningful school change.

Letting students know peer mediation is "a school life-style" gives them an alternative to violence. Parkman student Patricia Canady received a peer mediation award.

Surrounded daily by students overwhelmed with problems, teachers are aware of an en-croaching physical insecurity within their buildings. They, too, walk on tightropes. They want to teach, and they want their students to learn; but maintaining order comes first. Hall sweeps sap their energy. Walkie talkies are necessary but give them another problem–making sure they do not get in the hands of students. Once teachers were able to enter each other's classrooms easily, but in some schools they no longer carry master keys for security reasons. The tension leaves people exhausted at the end of the day, unable to contribute to or learn much from after-school sessions meant to help them professionally.

Big doses of self-esteem for their students become as important as learning content. But teachers, too, must cope with damaged self-esteems. "These schools have been forgotten," commented Ron Barber, as he retired as principal at Western Middle School in Louisville. Working in what are considered bottom-of-the-barrel schools, teachers can easily lose professional pride and resist efforts that imply they should change first. When central office policies don't address their needs or stress the teachers even further, they close their classroom doors for survival and cling to what they know–traditional ways of teaching.

Students at Frick want to pay attention and learn; it's just that sometimes there's too much else going on.

Starting Out

In 1989, most of the schools in the Clark network were places where people did not have the time, energy, or know-how to do something about their failures.

All of them, however, had a few teachers like Bill Compton. Chair of the math department at Frick Junior High School in Oakland, Compton is a realist ("The key to getting the school to change is unity among the faculty") and a very compassionate teacher ("If I were a young person here, I couldn't cope with the chaos").

Coping is part of Compton's job, in addition to building a reformed math department that detracked before the Clark initiative began. Compton has continued to push the idea that all children can learn well, "even if society doesn't believe that." On a late spring afternoon, one learns well what coping means. It is the last period of the day, and Compton apologizes for a messy room: "The cleaning people haven't been around this week." His students are especially squirmy, unsettled ever since the school day began with fire engines at the door—several small fires had been started in the building. It has been an unsettling year, with one student found murdered on school grounds and a night of vandalism in the fall that caused more than $80,000 in damage.

Compton's math lesson is well planned, however, and student aides work diligently while he tries to keep order. It is not the young male student, late to class, exposing his butt repeatedly when the teacher is preoccupied, who is the most disturbing. Rather, it is the constant pestering of students who are trying to listen or work by those not interested in either—usually girls distracted by boys—that teeters the class toward chaos.

Nonetheless, Compton engages some students, and many feel free to ask questions. Underneath, they want to pay attention and learn; it's just that today, there is too much else going on.

In the four years that Frick has been part of the Clark network, Compton says he has changed a lot. "I'm not as angry, not as strict a disciplinarian," he notes. He also has moved his own teaching and that of others in the math department away from dependence on textbooks emphasizing separate skills and toward multiple sources more suited for heterogeneous classes. These are ideas he often picked up at network meetings or from consultants who visited the school.

Rick Boettner, a Teach for America recruit at Frick, uses an "elaborate incentive program" to motivate his math students.

Skeptical of any single action promising miracles for Frick's terribly deprived students, Compton, nevertheless, took a leadership role in the school's study of different education reform models. He worries that the school's high teacher turnover rate will dilute decisions made by the faculty to adopt a specific change strategy. Yet he also admits the faculty is not as divided as it was when the Clark initiative began.

Glad to be in a math department that is trying new strategies, Rick Boettner believes his students can learn. "They are extremely intelligent and can do anything they set their minds to," he insists. This is Boettner's first year of teaching. He came to Frick as a Teach for America recruit with a newly earned degree in math and a desire to teach in urban schools. In the first few days of his summer of practice teaching in Los Angeles, he despaired: "I thought that if it is like this every day, I'll never make it." But enthusiasm and a willingness to adapt, traits Teach for America looks for, pulled him through, along with an attitude that "there is no way I am going to fail."

Boettner uses "an elaborate incentive program" to motivate his students, but credits his own enthusiasm—convincing students of the importance of what they are learning—for most of his success. A willingness to work after school, in a computer lab or at a pick-up game of basketball, gives him a special rapport with students.

His students are "extremely intelligent and can do anything they set their minds to," insists Boettner.

Elsewhere, the Clark initiative motivated a teacher here, a small core of teachers there, gradually helping to create an overall ethos of "can do" within a school.

Tony Dasaro, a math teacher at Western Middle School in Louisville, remembered that Western "drove me out of teaching for several years," but now says, "We are coming up; we are off the bottom of the heap." A combination of new strategies for teaching and the demands of Kentucky's new assessment system changed his classrooms. Not long ago his students were passive, disengaged, not likely to volunteer answers. In the spring of 1993, students competed to go to the blackboard to explain their answers or to read what they had written. They solved problems on how many hours of babysitting at certain charges would be needed to buy a radio or tape recorder, how to divide up a pizza in a group, or problems based on speed limits. Their answers were written out and defended in class discussions. Asked about the changes, Dasaro's students noted the work—"There's lots more work, lots more writing." But the word "like" also came up: they liked the new books, the calculators, and the sense that they were becoming better students.

Slowly Coming to a Consensus

The environment at Oakland's King Estates Junior High School has not always been calmer than at its neighbor's, Frick, even though King Estates is isolated on a ridge above the "flatlands." However, having the same principal for more than two years, Lynn Dodd, helped give the school some stability and enabled teachers to wring the most from the opportunities provided by the Clark initiative. "One of the biggest benefits has been the chance for staff to go out of the school and gain insights on what is happening in other places," says Dodd. She has spread the trip and workshop resources around.

More fundamental than curriculum changes, King Estates teachers began to question the level of expectations they held for students.

More fundamental than the curriculum changes, however, King Estates teachers began to question the level of expectations they held for students. Teachers thought they knew how to teach the students (93% African-American), says Dodd, but "they had never been challenged on how they were presenting material, even though students were not learning it." King Estates, similar to other predominantly African-American schools in the Clark network, had problems believing all of its students could tackle high content and work in groups without getting out of control.

The gradual infusion of better ideas, motivating teachers to consider high expectations possible for King Estates students, is refocusing staff energies, according to the principal. "Teachers are analyzing what they do and asking 'If I am attending to what they need, how could a student fail this course?' " Dodd says. The process is slow, traditions are hard to give up, and tensions flare; but she believes King Estates is moving toward restructuring.

One of the elements King Estates teachers have become more aware of is the need to recognize the students' culture at home, an issue that surfaced in a self-analysis by teachers of how they were helping or hindering progress. They realized their own cultural blindness was a barrier. Now, by student request, there is a course in African-American studies and another in Caribbean studies. A few minutes in Donald Green's art room and a visitor comes away dazed at the way he bombards students with ways to recognize artistic expression through posters, movies, sound. Every inch of Green's room is visually stimulating, much of it extraordinary art produced by his students who are not allowed to say "I can't" in his classes.

"Heavy fund raising" at King Estates is going into a pot to connect

Don Green's art class at King Estates Junior High dazzles a visitor with visual stimulation, much of it art produced by his students.

students to African-American culture, such as a trip to New Orleans for a jazz festival and to visit campuses of historically Black colleges (California does not have any). The staff also wants to expose at least 100 King Estates students to a month's study on a college campus during the summer–"we are looking for an historically Black college to adopt us," says Dodd.

The principal believes teachers' efforts have encouraged students to be more respectful. Teachers and students are edging toward each other on the "trust thing." As an outside coordinator for the Algebra Project at King Estates, Maisha Moses praises the progress made by math teachers to connect its concepts to other math instruction and to learn to enjoy working through a new curriculum. Yet she also worries about a student and staff culture "not conducive to effective learning, or to learning in general." The list of problems, she says, "can go on and on, everybody fruitlessly pointing the finger at everybody else." School staff, Moses observes, need to look at the whole picture "instead of trying to isolate variables and assigning blame." She also believes "there is no way teachers can solve all the problems kids have. But we must give 100% all the time of what skills we have."

King Estates needs that 100% commitment from its teachers. Its 1992 test scores on California's assessments dropped the most of any junior high school in Oakland, partly, the staff believes, because all testing was done on the same day instead of spread out over two days as in other schools. Still, when only 17.1% of eighth-graders came up to passing levels on reading and only 11% on writing, one must ask: why?

"The key to getting the school to change is unity among the faculty," said a teacher at Frick Junior High in Oakland.

Teachers as Learners

For Susan Shortt, a white teacher in a predominantly poor, white school–Iroquois Middle School in Louisville–the transformations needed to understand what students bring to the school experience were just as profound as for teachers at King Estates. In college, she did not learn how to reach youngsters trapped in poverty. She expected a cushy middle-class school where her values would be shared by students and parents.

Teaching at Iroquois was a struggle because she still had a picture of what students should be like. "The biggest thing Clark has done is change our mind sets," Shortt says. "We've been given an opportunity not only to learn how to deal academically with these children, but also to learn why they need extra help and how to give it." Before this change, at the end of the school day, she remembers, "there was no one here. Now, everyone is involved after school." From just a half-dozen teachers willing to learn about cooperative grouping, the attitude about cooperation has grown to include the whole faculty. "We know we will sink or swim together," says Shortt.

Sometimes, pure saturation produces change. Adding up the opportunities his 55 teachers have experienced in recent years, Skip Clemons, principal at Southern Middle School in Louisville, found 39 trained in the Socratic seminar, 14 using Writing to Learn with two of those now prepared to train others, almost 30 teachers using a parent involvement program, five teachers working with peer mediation, five using the Foxfire oral history/writing program, 30 teachers trained in cooperative learning, and an equal number trained to use cooperative discipline.

From all of these programs, the principal observes, teachers throughout the school have learned to be "facilitators, not actors" in their classrooms. Teachers have "let go," allowing students to solve problems on their own. They use different strategies "to push on the academic side." They plan curriculum across grade levels; and they are using data to help make decisions, such as focusing reform strategies on all grades instead of concentrating only on the eighth grade when students take the Kentucky assessments.

Teachers have learned to be "facilitators, not actors" in their classrooms. They have "let go," allowing students to solve problems on their own.

Amy Robertson, a seventh-grade language arts teacher at Southern, has "thrown out textbooks and spelling tests" in order to focus on writing. She shares a scoring rubric with students and parents so they will know what is expected of them. It spells out what a beginner with few skills would do and the stages that follow–developmental, proficient, and distinguished levels. Her message to parents is that she will pay attention to students' growth over time. Before this reform initiative got underway, "I was very frustrated," says Robertson. "I was one of the many teachers at Southern who was looking to leave. Once I learned I was the one who needed to make a change and that I had to have high expectations, things got better."

Clemons adds his own assessment: "When more and more students tell me 'I like this or that,' I know that teacher and student attitudes are changing together."

Changing Staff Development In Louisville

Traditional	Teacher-Centered
Preserving established practices	A change-oriented focus
Three- to six-hour segments	Up to five-day segments
Limited information offered	Variety of programs offered
Little hands-on experience	Depth of information and experiences
Little follow-up	Follow-up and support
Teachers on their own	Support groups within schools
Staff development credit	Credit plus teacher stipends
Interest-based programs	Research-based programs
Teachers as students/recipients	Teachers as leaders/inventors
Investment in programs/strategies	Investment in people
Emphasis on training	Equal emphasis on training and support
Teachers choose training with their own interests as main criteria	Teachers choose from offerings that enhance student performance and instructional goals
Teachers reluctant to try new practices	Teachers eager to try new practices
"How to" instructional learning	Thoughtful reflection on classroom practice
Individualistic learning	Team learning

Jefferson County Public Schools, 1993

Staff Development par Excellence

Writing to Learn is a staff development experience full of epiphanies for teachers in the Clark schools in three cities–Louisville, Milwaukee, and San Diego. It may appear to be a way to use writing to stimulate critical thinking among students, but essentially, this successful program is all about professional development. It is the teachers' turn to learn under WTL.

The Council for Basic Education provides extensive staff development in WTL led by Beverly Bimes-Michalak. This former National Teacher of the Year uses writing to give teachers a new perspective on how their students learn and how well, and it focuses primarily on subjects other than English. Enthusiasm for writing spreads across history, math, science, the arts, and even physical education. Teachers become involved in the writing process themselves, using it to hone their own critical thinking along with that of their students.

Bimes-Michalak sees a special challenge to providing staff development in urban schools. Some teachers "unknowingly victimize their students by stereotyping them," she says, and they end up paying more attention to "rescuing" than to demanding high performance. These teachers tend to tolerate inappropriate behavior, blaming it on students' "lack of upbringing."

Moreover, Bimes-Michalak finds urban classrooms more dependent than most on passive learning strategies and thus infrequent places for reflection. Most staff development relies on quick remedies and packaged resources because no one has promoted the idea that good staff development requires investments in time, resources, and funds.

Writing to Learn does it differently. It incorporates Bimes-Michalak's philosophy that good staff development should:

✓ Be long-range and interactive. The WTL process starts with an intensive two-week summer session for teams of teachers who are encouraged to share and discuss concerns and work out ways to use writing for critical thinking in their classrooms. Out of this experience, Bimes-Michalak hopes teachers will become comfortable relying on each other professionally.

✓ Provide followup in the classroom. Building on the "togetherness" aspect of this staff development, the school year includes joint planning and

Some teachers pay more attention to "rescuing" students than to demanding high performance, says Beverly Bimes-Michalak, who trains teachers in Writing to Learn.

teaching, modeling, and observing. Bimes-Michalak visits each classroom several times during the year, participating in this process herself.

✓ Rely on intervention through feedback. Her mode of working with teachers is to ask critical questions that encourage thoughtful teaching—"Why did you...?" and "Have you considered...?" and "If you did this lesson again, what changes would you make?" Bimes-Michalak is in classrooms, a phone call away, or at the other end of a computer modem to keep asking these questions throughout the year.

✓ Include evaluation. WTL teachers are constantly asking: What evidence do we have that this is working? What changes need to be made?

Anita Graham shares scoring sheets with students so they know exactly what they are expected to get from an assignment.

A year after the first training session, teachers attend another, aimed at helping them learn to deliver the same quality staff development to their colleagues. This way, says Bimes-Michalak, the process keeps going instead of bowing to the whims of administrations and budgets.

For Anita Graham, an English teacher at Muirlands Middle School in San Diego, two years of experience with WTL have changed her classroom focus. Before, she might have taught poetry in a traditional, pedantic way, standing in front of the class and reading poems, asking questions. Now her students read several poems on the same subject—selections by Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Stephen Crane, for example, all dealing with war—and look for meaning. On their own, they underline favorite passages, box unfamiliar words, or put question marks beside things they don't understand. They write what they would ask or tell the poets, if they could meet them; they select the most memorable line of a poem. In a discussion group, the students share what they have done and take up a series of questions about each poem. The group's answers are presented to the whole class and discussed. This approach, says Graham, captures students' imaginations and allows them to show how well they can apply their learning.

Instead of keeping her objectives a mystery, Graham shares scoring sheets with students so they know exactly what they are expected to get from an assignment. They trade papers and fill out score sheets, learning in the process to look critically at a piece of writing. WTL, she believes, "makes kids own their writing, they see themselves as writers." By selecting and improving on portfolios that include a variety of writing types, they see the value of writing reappear continuously in different forms.

For Graham, the best outcome of Writing to Learn is the sharing with colleagues. She has teamed up with a social studies teacher. "We both own this program," she says.

The most telling benefit, however, is one teachers may not recognize on their own. Ask teachers at Muirlands who are using WTL about the progress of the Barrio Logan students, and they seem surprised. They have to pause and sort out the students in their minds, because the enthusiasm and goals of writing across the curriculum make it natural to set high expectations for all students. Teachers become color blind when staff development is working at its best.

Anita Graham, right, credits Writing to Learn with stimulating the imaginations of her Muirlands students and helping them learn to apply their knowledge.

Seeing that Change Works

Organized as a middle school many years ago, West Baltimore was settled in its ways. A large school, it was divided into "houses," with support staff, teams, and activities in each house. But it had mostly traditional teaching and not much teacher involvement in making decisions.

Walk down any of the wings of West Baltimore these days, and you will see every class set up for cooperative learning, with desks grouped together and students working with each other. Teams exist in more than name only. Aided by a roving "interdisciplinary integrator" who used to be a librarian and knows how to find resources readily, the teachers on each team work to integrate their subject areas. Principal Sheila Kolman is the *only* one of the 12 Clark principals who was in the position before the initiative started and is an admittedly strong-handed leader. "There are some days when the teachers are so empowered," she acknowledges with some chagrin, "that I wonder who runs this place."

Classroms with rows of desks are history at West Baltimore Middle School, where the emphasis is on cooperative learning and desks are grouped together. Active learning is the norm in Brenda McCullogh's French class, right, and Thelma Watford's language arts class, below.

égal
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The West Baltimore staff, comparatively stable for an urban school, felt comfortable with itself before the Clark initiative; they weren't perfect, but believed they followed much of the literature about good middle schools. Today, the consensus of the 92 professional faculty is that students must move on to higher levels of performance and that the faculty must work together more closely to make that happen.

Not everyone believes this, mind you, but a solid core has seen that changing instruction helps more students become successful.

Broad opportunities for staff development were at the heart of the Clark activities at West Baltimore. Workshops, national meetings, and district seminars all contributed to a desire for more information, leading to better designed staff development within the school. But West Baltimore also had an ace in the hole–a relationship with researchers at The Johns Hopkins University that enabled the school faculty to hitch onto a lever for change and ride it towards overall school reform.

Baltimore had an ace in the hole– a relationship with researchers at The Johns Hopkins University. The schools and the researchers "came to have shared expectations," says Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins.

Johns Hopkins brought an approach to instruction that evolved out of research on cooperative learning. Student Team Reading and Student Team Writing are more proscriptive than WTL, primarily because they were designed for research purposes. Students read good literature rather than basal reading series; analyze what they are reading through specific strategies, such as identifying main ideas and summarizing; and do as much writing as reading. Cooperative learning, with incentives for performing well, is a major tool of both the reading and writing programs. Hence the desks that are pushed together throughout West Baltimore's classrooms.

Johns Hopkins researchers had been involved for many years with Baltimore schools, but the support of the Clark Foundation allowed a stronger relationship to develop with the two Baltimore schools in the network. Teachers were nudged to integrate STR and STW into their regular instruction, and the researchers tracked student achievement through a controlled study. With the school district's central office in Baltimore distracted by turnovers, the Johns Hopkins researchers became steady guides for the two schools, even though they would not claim to be stand-ins for systemic leadership by the district.

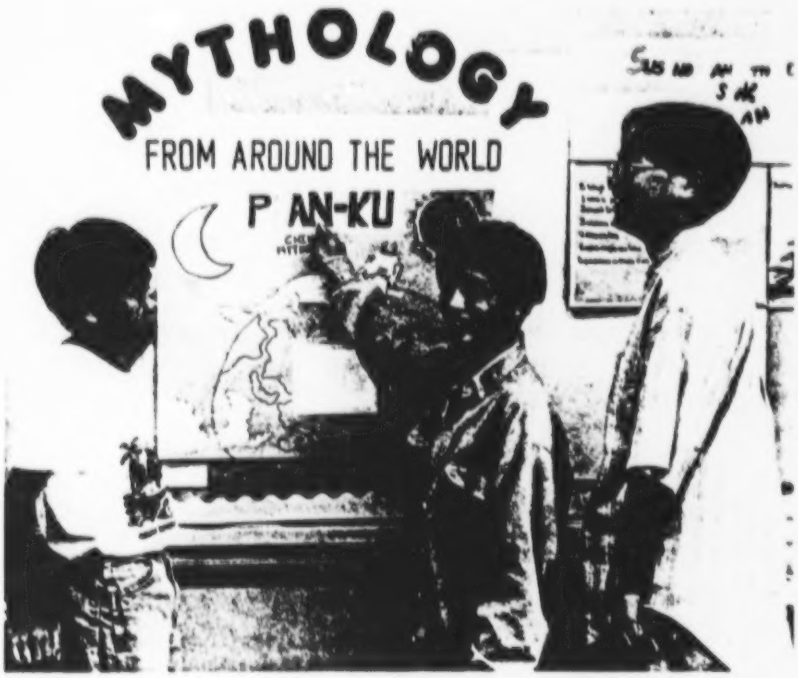
The schools and the researchers "came to have shared expectations," says Joyce Epstein of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins. "The schools understood that I couldn't measure and evaluate something if they didn't use our ideas, and we realized that the schools could not use what we were learning from the research if we just swooped in and out."

STR and STW add content to the process of cooperative learning, but neither content nor process will be adopted if teachers are just told about them by researchers, according to James McPartland, a colleague of

Epstein's at Johns Hopkins. "We know that cooperative learning is a better way of delivering content than traditional teaching, but that knowledge has to be arrived at by the staff through trying it out."

Thelma Watford, a seventh grade language arts teacher at West Baltimore, plunged into STR during a one-week summer workshop two years before the Clark project began. She was told she had to take the training–and she resisted strongly at the time. The first year, she just explored the idea and resented the fact that her classes were used as guinea pigs to show off to visitors. More importantly, she wasn't comfortable with the higher noise level of students in cooperative groups.

It took awhile, but Watford is now committed to STR and STW and to cooperative learning. She uses the strategies every day. She has learned "to hold students accountable for the noise level" and marvels that students can go from one step to the other in the cooperative process without asking for help. Students ask more substantive questions now, and she believes they learn better from their peers. "They are able to take criticism from each other," she observes. When students work in groups, she adds, "they want



A diverse student body gives youngsters the opportunity to learn about many cultures. Students at Mann in San Diego explore Chinese mythology in a social studies class.

everyone to succeed. They get upset when someone does something wrong."

Brenda McCullough, a French teacher at West Baltimore, also uses cooperative learning and the content standards of STR and STW. "I was afraid of losing control," she recalls, but she took the training and eased into the cooperative strategies. "A whole new world opened up," she says. Her students are more creative, work better together, and she gets responses from students who never used to speak up in class. "I now feel I am accomplishing something as a teacher," McCullough says.

When students work in groups, "they want everyone to succeed. They get upset when someone does something wrong."

West Baltimore teachers acknowledge that the students helped push them into changing. Those students who enjoyed cooperative learning in one classroom wanted all of their teachers to use it. Research results also helped. The Johns Hopkins researchers documented dramatic restructuring of classroom instruction, with students much more actively engaged in their own learning. The experimental classes at West Baltimore and Calverton Middle Schools scored significantly higher on achievement tests than did control classes in similar schools.

Starting with the sixth grade language arts teachers in 1989, trained and guided by the Johns Hopkins researchers, cooperative learning and high content began to spread throughout the curriculum at West Baltimore. By the spring of 1993, almost two-thirds of the teachers were using cooperative learning to deliver deeper content than had existed before, concluded a teacher-led assessment.

Language arts teachers like Watford "blazed the trail," according to principal Kolman, convincing teachers in other subject areas to create higher learning expectations. Using Clark resources for materials and staff development, the school scheduled all eighth-grade students into algebra in 1992-93, a year ahead of a new school district policy. Teachers are trying hard to eliminate retentions and supported the establishment of a suspension room within the school, rather than send misbehaving students home. Resource teachers for special education students moved into regular classrooms along with their students. Experienced teachers volunteered to be mentors for new teachers.

The teachers at West Baltimore are building up their capacity to manage change. What they need most now is not only "to stay on task, but also to get a pat on the back," says Epstein.

Developing Together

Technical assistance from the outside helped initiate and sustain reforms at the network schools. Since the beginning of the project, the staff of the Urban Youth Initiative of the Center for Early Adolescence has provided technical assistance tailored to the needs of each school. The Center's support evolved to meet changing priorities. Originally provided by national staff who visited each site regularly, technical assistance was supplemented by local consultants during the 1992-93 school year in Baltimore, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego.

The Center's national staff at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, assists the Louisville schools. The consultants, former administrators or teachers themselves, help school leadership teams with planning, developing liaisons with district-level personnel, and facilitating staff retreats. They have become advisors and confidants to project principals and friendly critics with the staff. Working as a team themselves, the local consultants and the Center's national staff link individual teachers, schools, and districts with outside resources.

The Center emphasizes bringing teachers, principals, and district personnel together for shared professional experiences. This includes organizing various project-related meetings in each city and annual conferences for teams from all five districts. "This allows them to establish a culture of learning from each other," notes Holly Hatch, director of the Urban Youth Initiative.

The Principal Connection

Consulting with the principals in the Clark network requires fast work. Don Rollie of the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education had to grapple with a revolving door spinning almost out of control: the 12 Clark schools had 25 principals in five years.

Meeting with the principals twice a year and on call as a sounding board whenever needed, Rollie constantly rebuilt the culture of the group, just as he told principals they had to do when they took over a school. "If you are going to restructure, to transform a school, you need at least a critical mass of teachers who have the same vision, the same commitment to a mission," he explains. "And that starts with the leadership of the principal." This is very difficult to pull off when the players keep changing.

Rollie is unequivocal on one point–principals determine the culture of a school. Teachers will model the behavior of a principal whom they trust, one who "walks the walk," he says. They won't respect one who talks well but doesn't act on his or her words. Principals also affect the culture by providing opportunities for teachers to grow. This kind of leadership takes place over time, Rollie believes, and is not for the faint of heart or those looking for a magic bullet. The principal with real leadership skills will say: "I can't change things in a year. Give me four. But at the end of a year, I will have some systems in place and notions established and demonstrations that show consistency in my approach." Few principals in the Clark network were around long enough to prove Rollie's point.

Two were promoted to high school principalships, one retired, some moved back to elementary schools where they were more comfortable. Others burned out and/or made lateral transfers and disappeared into the system, often because their talk exceeded their abilities to make changes. Whatever the reasons, there were too many changes for a small group of schools, causing one to question the interest of school district leadership in either developing and supporting talent or in maintaining stability for very troubled schools.

The group of principals that was around in the 1992-93 school year learned a lot from a job-shadowing project carried out by Rollie and others. Following the principals from the start of a school day to the end, the study produced one major finding—most of the principals spent an inordinate amount of time keeping order and dealing with administrative trivia. These tasks overshadowed their time for instructional and leadership matters. Some of the principals had suspected this, but to actually see it charted in front of them was "powerful."

Consulting with principals requires fast work. The 12 Clark schools had 25 principals in five years.

King Estates principal Lynn Dodd juggles her roles as "hall cop" and instructional leader.

The Clark principals built bonds and friendships–only a phone call away.

Rollie's efforts, when he could guide a principal over time, helped some of them redirect their energies and attention back into instructional leadership. He also started them on efforts to conduct assessments of programs within their schools, a skill none of the school faculties was good at or had even considered before the Clark initiative began. On site visits, Rollie expanded the assessment training to include teachers. They learned to use interviews and surveys to evaluate specific programs such as advisories, Writing to Learn, or cooperative learning. These do not replace external assessments, but supplement them, giving principals and teachers experience at gathering and analyzing data and using them to make changes.

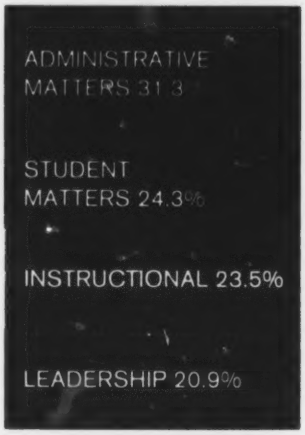
Like the teachers who learned to break down their isolation and share through networks, principals also found their peers to be a critically important support. Being a principal can be lonely, especially in schools that do not get much attention or are demoralized by the grief heaped on them by their communities.

The Clark principals built bonds and friendships–only a phone call away. Sometimes their contacts are strictly business, to ask what others think about a particular resource person or program; sometimes they are to let off steam at the end of a very stressful day. Veteran principals in the network become mentors for new ones. Unlike the situation within their districts, the principals in the Clark network feel they can share ideas and concerns in a noncompetitive environment. They steal ideas from each other without guilt.

"This is the Cadillac of principal training programs," commented Efrain Vila, principal of Kosciuszko Middle School in Milwaukee. (In the fall of 1993, Vila became the first Hispanic principal of a Milwaukee high school.) When the principals first began to meet, he recalls, "we were competitive, talking about 'my school' and 'my thoughts.'" The principals dropped that mode and became "critical friends, able to tell each other there are other ways to skin a cat and still be collegial and congenial about it."

The principals' meetings focus on instructional leadership, downplaying the "hall cop" role. Spending three or four days together away from the constant interruptions at their schools, principals get to practice the reflec-

Principals' Use of Time, 1992-93



"Administrative Matters" include personnel management, student attendance, school budget issues, and communication with the central office.

"Student Matters" include discipline, counselling, mentoring, and other student activities.

"Instructional" includes interactions with individual teachers, groups of teachers, and students regarding teaching and learning; it also includes staff development.

"Leadership" includes actions by principals to develop and motivate teachers, share information, and engage in community activities.

Compiled by the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education

tion they want teachers to develop. Sheila Kolman of West Baltimore acknowledges her skills got better because of the network. And that she acquired some new ones. "I am more sensitive, more focused," she says.

When the Clark initiative began, Rollie notes, the principals were all saying that restructuring would be difficult and take time, "but they always say things like that, hoping it will be easy and won't take so long." What they found out is that the aphorisms are really true. It does take time–and those schools lucky enough to have principals with staying power or potential for leadership achieved more for their students than schools constantly dealing with turnover in leadership.

If urban school districts are really serious about reforms, then they must recognize how very difficult it is to bring about change, how impossible it is when school leadership comes and goes. "These schools are not just restructuring," says Rollie. "They have to change their culture." This is not a job for a one-year wonder.

STUDENTS

Young adolescents rely on their senses a lot. Cognitive experts would say they tend to be "visual and tactile," but in plain language this means they respond mostly to what they see, hear, and touch. The changes in what they study or how they learn have to be pointed out to them, but their senses tell them first when things are getting better. Ask a graduating class from most of the Clark schools about the biggest changes they've noticed since they enrolled, and you'll hear that the school is cleaner, it's been painted, it's quieter, there is air conditioning, there are new books.

These are important symbols of change to students. But keep asking. They will begin to talk about their studies being harder, they have to do more writing–and, finally, you hear, "We're better writers than we were." And shyly, they admit they like that.

The Content Thing

Teachers can articulate what students feel. Teachers know what higher content really means to their students.

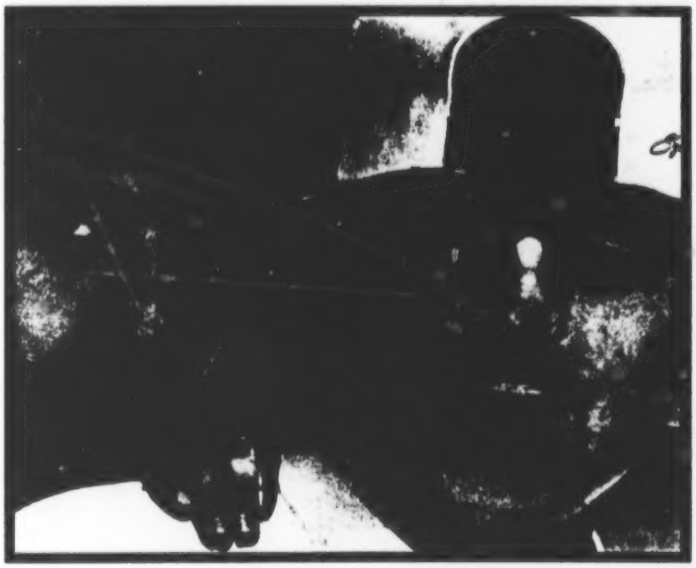
Take the emphasis on writing. In Louisville, the resources provided by Clark coincided with state assessment mandates based essentially on writing skills, even in math. The staff development available to teachers in the three Louisville schools "was on the cutting edge," according to Ron Barber, former principal at Western Middle School, helping the network schools keep their heads above water in a very demanding assessment system.

For one group of students at Western, writing and reading assignments turned into personal experiences that the school could never have provided on its own. Language arts teacher Linda McFadin, attending a summer

The Clark initiative provided students with:

- ✓ More exciting, engaging teaching because their teachers learned new skills and raised their expectations for students.
- ✓ Access to high content and critical thinking instruction through a variety of curriculum-related quality programs offered to schools.
- ✓ Specific programs to overcome student failure, such as transition activities between elementary and middle schools for students considered at risk, or catch-up groups to promote retained students to their regular grade.
- ✓ Greater personal support because special programs and staff training helped teachers and administrators see the need for it and how to do it.
- ✓ Activities to broaden students' views of communities and of their life choices, such as field trips linked to interdisciplinary teaching, career awareness and job mentoring programs, and community service.
- ✓ More recognition and awards for progress on achievement.

The major accomplishments included:



- ✓ Indications that students were looking ahead to postsecondary plans, such as opting to enroll in academic high schools or wanting to take algebra.
- ✓ Improvement in student achievement at half of the schools, either on standardized tests or with new types of assessments such as portfolios.
- ✓ More contact for students with the adults who support them, both as advisors and as teachers.
- ✓ An increase in critical thinking among students.
- ✓ Evidence that students were "taking charge" of their education, such as successful experiences with cooperative learning, portfolio assessments, and linking school work with future choices.
- ✓ Improved self-esteem among many students, boosted by greater accessibility to needed services.
- ✓ Improved attendance and a decrease in discipline problems among students in many of the schools.

Shakespeare workshop, linked up with a Books Behind Bars program, bringing prison inmates together with at-risk students to share literature and writing. McFadin's students prepared skits based on Shakespeare, composed or found poems to share with prisoners, read the same novels and discussed them in small groups at the prisons. The inmates performed and wrote, too. Adults who thought they were illiterate were memorizing and speaking lines from Shakespeare; students for whom Shakespeare had been beyond their reach and interest discovered that the witches' incantations in *Macbeth* sounded just like rap.

Both Stacy Ihrke as Juliet and Robert Harris as Romeo, two of McFadin's volunteers for the program, enjoyed learning unfamiliar words. "They're hard sometimes," said Harris, "but I learned to stick with it." Many of the students already knew someone in prison; all were familiar with the circumstances that lead to incarceration and made the connection about the consequences of wrong choices. McFadin sees opportunities to broaden student skills: a language arts/reading block at Western will provide time for more writing, particularly in journals, and she plans to use the Books Behind Bars program for more writing tasks.

Children's Express, a national journalism program for students, teaches interview techniques, synthesis, and writing to create a product shared with others. At Western, this was a publication for the school. The skills learned through Children's Express also proved useful to students in the Books Behind Bars project.

Students at Western Middle School in Louisville talk literature and writing with prison inmates.

The key to writing is "practice, practice, practice."

When Katesha Murphy's grandmother died, she wanted to write about her feelings. She wanted to tell how much her grandmother, with whom she had lived off and on, had meant to her. It was her grandmother who "taught me to be myself, to love everything no matter what shape, or color, or form." She bought Katesha books and paper and pencils, gave her crossword puzzles to keep her mind busy.

But when her grandmother died, young Katesha couldn't put her feelings on paper. When she left the eighth grade at Southern Middle School several years later, she had found her voice. A story she submitted to the Louisville *Courier-Journal*'s Young Authors contest, one of 35,000 entries from the area, won first place in her division.

"Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide"–her winning story–was a frank and terrifying description of child abuse, deeply revealing about the relationships of a child to her mother and her stepfather. Katesha got the idea from watching a television show on molested children, but her writing showed that even in fiction, she had learned to express feelings. "The best way to do that," she says emphatically, "is to put it on paper. Your opinions can't harm anyone." Talking a few days after a near-riot in Louisville following a festival along the river, she thoughtfully suggested that the anger expressed in the crowd "came from home." And, she added, "if more kids could write about their feelings and not think they are being judged for what they say, things would be a lot better."

Katesha entered Southern in the middle of the seventh grade and was surrounded with incentives to write. Pushed to do a lot of writing in her classes and aided by having a computer to compose on, she learned "to keep working, to practice, practice, practice." She spent over a month working on her winning short story, redoing it when it seemed too violent, refining it, making it say what she wanted it to. "Write what you feel," her mother encouraged. Katesha's mother tells her that she will be the one of her four children to go to college.

At home, Katesha enjoys writing on her own. She also helps her little sister learn to write and reads books, including those by Maya Angelou and Judy Blume, to get ideas. In 1993 she started a mystery story about middle school children. Living in a neighborhood overrun with strife, she describes herself as "a peaceful person" who has found a way to express herself. She wants to be a teacher–and to write stories for children.

Initially, McFadin had her doubts about using such advanced material as Shakespeare with her students. But no more. She found that students might stumble through the text at first, but if they see a purpose and keep at it, an expanded world of language opens up for them.

At Southern Middle School, also in Louisville, Principal Skip Clemons acknowledged that some teachers move out of traditional teaching slowly, going back and forth on such ideas as cooperative learning until they get hooked on the idea. However, enough of his teachers learned to restructure the writing process, to a point where students were at the center and taking charge of their learning, that they tipped the school toward a writing-centered one rather quickly. The school's state assessment scores told them they made the right decision. Its 1992-93 eighth-grade writing portfolio scores reflected higher achievement; the number of portfolios rated proficient, or the third highest level, nearly doubled; those at the lowest level decreased considerably.

Borrowing ideas from Muirlands teachers in San Diego, Deborah Pattee and other teachers at Parkman Middle School in Milwaukee developed a core group using Writing to Learn. Because students collect, judge, and reflect on their writing, they see their own improvements, "they get excited about their own progress," according to Pattee, a social studies teacher. In addition to portfolios, her students keep "learning logs," or daily reflections about what they have learned.

Students take charge of learning. In a unit on China, for example, all of Pattee's students began with the same 30 points. They were given scoring guides listing the expectations of the course: arrive on time, follow rules, do homework, come with supplies, have a positive attitude about learning, make contributions. These behavioral points, plus the quality of their work, determined their final points, with subtractions made for inadequate performance. Those who finished at the top won a trip to Chinatown in Chicago.

The writing assignments pile up in Parkman students' portfolios, different approaches for different audiences. A letter assignment during a unit on the Holocaust called on them to pretend they were Jewish children in Germany writing to cousins in the United States. For a science assignment, students pretended they were a parasite explaining their effect on a

Deborah Pattee at Milwaukee's Parkman Middle School has her students keep "learning logs," daily reflections about what they have learned.

host. Every marking period, Pattee's students cull through their portfolios, selecting those they want to keep or improve on, learning how to judge what is good work and what isn't.

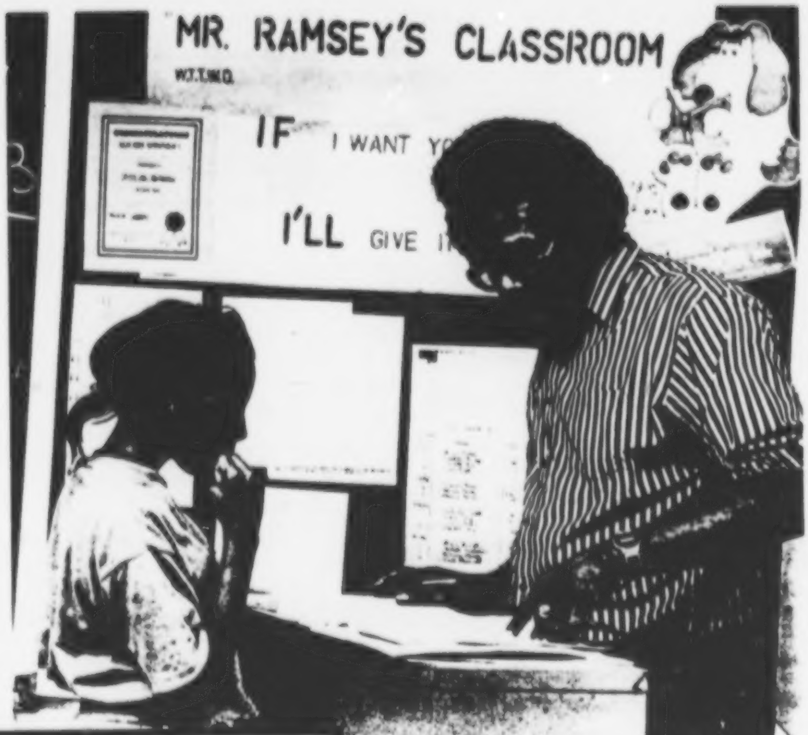
After two years, 18 teachers at Parkman were involved in WTL, and the faculty was at a point of deciding to adopt it for all students.

A Right or a Privilege?

Then there is algebra.

Is it a foreign language for students never exposed to the verbal context of math, a gatekeeper to college preparatory courses in high school, a reward for good students, or a necessity for all students? When the Clark initiative began, algebra was barely mentioned outside of classes for the gifted. However, a combination of district/state requirements in some instances and a feeling among schools that algebra embodied the high content envisioned by the Foundation moved it to the top of the list of priorities. In most of the Clark schools, pre-algebra or algebra exists now for all students.

At Baltimore's Calverton Middle School, math teacher Patrick Reed was barely able to put together one class in 1990-91. Two years later, three of his five seventh-grade classes are pre-algebra. One class that was not quite ready for algebra at the beginning of the 1992-93 school year started with a basic skills review, then began algebra at mid-term. "This class did



Harold Ramsey, right, at Parkman Middle School in Milwaukee, explains that the Algebra Project helps students connect the study of math with the use of it outside school. Maisha Moses, below, Algebra Project coordinator at King Estates in Oakland, recognizes that students can't change overnight, but adds that "we must give 100 percent all the time of what skills we have."

the best of the five," Reed says, explaining that it made him rethink how to teach the subject.

At Calverton, students quickly felt the importance of moving into algebra. Research by Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins found that in middle schools offering algebra, all math instruction, no matter what level, was held in greater esteem by students. "Algebra is the most important thing I need to get into high school," said Lanette Whitaker, a seventh grader in Beverly Polk's math class. "You can't pretend you know what you are doing in algebra," added Jaconda Harrison. "But once you get the hang of it, it gets to be fun." It's quite a challenge for Samuel Paige, another classmate, but he realizes "the teacher is asking me to learn to work harder so I can get something better in life."

Polk believes algebra is very good for students' self-esteem. When algebra has status, the value system among students shifts, and now seventh graders at Calverton "are wanting to get in." Students in Polk's regular seventh-grade math classes were allowed to take pre-algebra in the last six weeks of the school year, "and they were on cloud nine," she says.

In California, new math frameworks and a general restructuring of the math curriculum helped push network schools in Oakland and San Diego toward algebra for all students, certainly in Oakland's junior high schools. In Baltimore, it will soon be mandated for eighth graders, but both Calverton and West Baltimore were ahead of the mandate, a special plus for an urban school.

"Algebra is the most important thing I need to get into high school," says a Calverton student.

In some of the Clark schools, the Algebra Project led the way. A philosophy, a curriculum, and a value system all wrapped up in one, the Algebra Project usually begins with sixth graders. It uses ordinary experiences, such as riding a bus or subway, to get students to think mathematically. First, they experience math (going in and out of town on a subway illustrates negative and positive numbers), then they write about the experience in regular language, and finally express it algebraically. Before they know it, they are on the road to college-preparatory math. Designed especially for disadvantaged students unfamiliar with terms that take them from arithmetic to higher-order math, the Algebra Project also has a certain mystique to it—valuable to both teachers and students—because it involves Robert Moses, a hero of the civil rights movement. In the early 1980s, he started the Algebra Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when he saw a need for new approaches in his own children's school.

Bearded Harold Ramsey taught math for 17 years before he was caught up in the training and philosophy for the Algebra Project when it was presented to Parkman Middle School in Milwaukee. "I was a very discipline-minded teacher: I lectured; I drilled on skills," he says. "I had to learn to open up, to let students express themselves about what they were learning, and to reflect on what I was teaching." Ramsey's students fill the spectrum on interest and ability in math when they arrive in his classroom. Some have only the basic skills; others are so secure "they feel they can make an A without trying." The Algebra Project makes math a subject for wide-ranging discussions, critical thinking, and writing. Everyday experiences of students become expressed in math terms. Students at either end of the ability scale "are growing in skills," says Ramsey. Moreover, there is a spillover effect, he observes, as students improve in reading comprehension and learn to express themselves more logically. Some students learn for the first time to make connections between studying math and using it outside of school.

The enthusiasm over algebra, or any other subject infused with higher content and new teacher skills, needs a reality check, however. The staff development demands are enormous, and in some schools the Algebra Project is still limited to a single or only a few teachers. Like teachers, students also don't change overnight. The Algebra Project, for example, integrates many characteristics thought to be rewarding and exciting for young adolescents–working together, having opportunities to discuss their learning, using real-life examples to learn an abstract subject. These instructional strategies need "to be carried out in an environment where students want to share ideas," observes Maisha Moses, Algebra Project coordinator at King Estates Junior High School in Oakland.

Urban students who have fallen behind do not need more of the same dreary repetition of basic skills.

Critical Thinking Skills, Not Remedial Drills

Another program adopted by several Clark schools replaces the drill-and-kill of remedial classes with those focused on critical thinking. The Higher Order Thinking Skills project, known as HOTS, was developed by Stan Pogrow at the University of Arizona; it assumes that urban students who have fallen behind do not need more of the same dreary repetition of basic skills, but, rather, need to make up for their lack of opportunities to learn how to think and absorb more complex knowledge. In HOTS classes, teachers guide students through decisionmaking scenarios but do not "dumb down" the material or tell them what to do with it; computer simulations and other activities reinforce learning.

Ideally, students stay in the HOTS program for two years, receiving daily infusions of high content learning, reinforced by work on computers. Teachers must be well trained and receive consistent follow-up support. HOTS succeeds best where individual teachers become deeply involved in what HOTS can do for students.

One such teacher is Evie Tong, a long-time special education teacher, who manages three HOTS classes at Muirlands Middle School in San Diego. In her opinion, HOTS keeps her students, most of them Barrio Logan

Warming up Learning

Teachers at Western Middle School in Louisville assessed its HOTS program, using interviews with students and teachers as the principal measure. They concluded that it helped students show original thinking, work cooperatively in a group, and persevere on tasks. Almost 70% of seventh graders, in their second year of HOTS, were quite positive about being able to transfer to other classes what they discussed or learned in HOTS. Their answers show the range of higher-order thinking presented in HOTS:

✓ "The computer skills that I learned in HOTS helped me in my computer class, because we did some of the same things, like the 'Oregon Trail,' writing letters, and writing stories."

✓ "When we talked about strategies in HOTS, I used it in math... like looking for patterns."

✓ "In science and English, we figure out words."

✓ "In reading, we did a report on whales, and we did the same thing in HOTS. It helped us to find the definitions of words we didn't know, and this helped me to find words in reading."

✓ "During Kentucky Derby time when the balloon race was coming up, in social studies we were talking about the person that had navigated the balloon, and I told the class 'aeronaut' because we learned that in HOTS on the 'Ride the Wind' program."

✓ "In reading, when I don't know the meaning of a word, I look at the context to figure out the meaning."

students, interested in coming to school. Before the program began, "there was no help for these students," she says.

Tong praises the components of HOTS: allowing students to work together in small groups; emphasizing hands-on learning; giving students time to think through problems; valuing all answers; and teaching them skills, such as notetaking, that are useful in other classes.

Started as a seventh-grade elective, the HOTS program is now part of the sixth-grade elective wheel at Muirlands, with students selected on the basis of test scores in language, teacher recommendations, and parental permission (a parents' night for HOTS students in 1993 drew 100% participation). Research by Tong shows that students who attend HOTS classes for two years have marked improvement in core subjects. Her students are now making the honor roll; five in the 1992-93 school year were nominated as Students of the Month; and the president of the Hispanic Leadership student council in 1992-93 was a HOTS student. (Similar results are occur-

The Higher Order Thinking Skills Project, known as HOTS, replaces "drill-and-kill" remedial classes with computer-assisted critical thinking. To Abe Rocha at Muirlands in San Diego, HOTS took the "boring" out of school and led him to a real interest in science.

ring in the HOTS classes at Mann Middle School across town, where in 1992-93, 15% of the HOTS students made the honor roll and 83% maintained a C or better grade average.)

And then there is Abe Rocha. Everyone at Muirlands knows Abe—he's a "heller" says Tong; a ringleader for trouble, say many teachers, both exasperated and charmed by Abe's ability to get by. In the past, he would roll his big brown eyes and hide his intelligence behind fake bravery. But Abe signed up for HOTS, thinking he would get to play games on the computer. He is now caught up in what computers can teach him. (His mother finally bought him his own computer, and his house has become a popular spot for classmates.)

Without HOTS, says Abe, "school would be boring." He is learning to take notes in other classes, the smaller HOTS classes help him settle down, he has learned to enjoy doing research, and he feels less frustrated. "I understand me better," he has decided.

His core teachers "see a real difference in him since he started HOTS," Muirlands Principal Cassandra Countryman says. But even they don't know how far he has come. Admitting that attitude "used to get me in trouble," Abe became so absorbed in science lessons about whales that he has decided he wants to be a veterinarian. Now in the ninth grade, he enrolled, voluntarily, at the highly academic La Jolla High School, which he knows is a demanding environment. His wish, for a while anyway, is "to stay in HOTS all day."

"If I don't teach to my kids' social needs, I might as well take the textbooks and toss them out the window."

Supporting Students

The teachers in the urban schools of the Clark network are not really different from teachers in other situations. They are there to impart knowledge, to get their students ready for the next stage of academic work. Most will tell you bluntly that their job is not to counsel. This is an understandable response for traditionally trained teachers, but in urban schools, it is becoming a highly unproductive attitude.

Like it or not, teachers in inner-city middle schools must learn to remove barriers; that is, they must if they truly want their students to achieve. Small group advisory periods, for example, were begun in many of the schools, but not without lingering resistance and tension over whether or not teachers could really take on the necessary skills to guide students through discussions on social and personal issues and help them make positive choices.

For Erin Gaebler, a former science teacher at Iroquois Middle School in Louisville, there is no choice. Involved in a program called Effective Parenting Information for Children (EPIC), she has become a counselor and conducts workshops for both students and parents, following a curriculum that encourages wise choices in school and out. "I feel like this is my job," she stresses. "If I don't teach to my kids' social needs, I might as well take the textbooks and toss them out the window."

EPIC provides a bonus. Stressing problem-solving and writing, the curriculum "fits" very well with the performance assessment requirements of Kentucky's new testing plan. Gaebler shared the lesson ideas–constructed to be used for just a few minutes or a full class period–with Iroquois teachers in all subjects so they knew what was included in EPIC sessions and could integrate their lessons with them.

Teachers using EPIC have fewer discipline referrals and report greater self-esteem among students. The curriculum encourages a lot of discussion between teachers and students. One exercise, for example, involved students in a discussion of rule making and coincided with a parent workshop on the same topic, so children and parents were able to talk together on the same level.

With stipends from the Clark initiative, teachers in the Baltimore schools wrote curricula for their advisories, using newspaper clippings, literature passages, study skills, and discussion guides from counseling resources for the content. When Baltimore teachers, many of whom had resisted the idea of an advisory, sat down in 1992 to evaluate the impact of the Clark initiative, they still felt the advisory programs were "challenging to implement." Their report included a comment that teachers had to learn to create an atmosphere "in which no question is stupid, and the only wrong question is the one not asked." The teachers also admitted, however, that students were expressing themselves in more positive ways and the advisories had let students know that when they were in trouble, "they were not alone."

Teachers had to learn to create an atmosphere "in which no question is stupid, and the only wrong question is the one not asked."

Reaching Out

In some of the schools, the Clark initiative started discussions about support outside the school, leading to partnerships that brought real services for students. In Louisville, the downtown business community provides a job shadowing experience for every eighth grader in the three Clark schools. A career program at Kosciuszko in Milwaukee started with business involvement in a science class and grew to a total career awareness plan throughout the three grades, involving community service, job shadowing, and mentoring by businesspeople.

Two schools, in different parts of the country, reached to the past for inspiration and support for students. At a special ceremony honoring a former principal, Parkman Middle School in Milwaukee found spontaneous support from former graduates. Alumni from the 1960s through the 1980s told current students about the school as they knew it; they described academic teams, drill squads, and extensive parent involvement. At Calverton Middle School in Baltimore, alumni attended a Career Week for students, speaking about life after middle school and how they had shaped their careers.

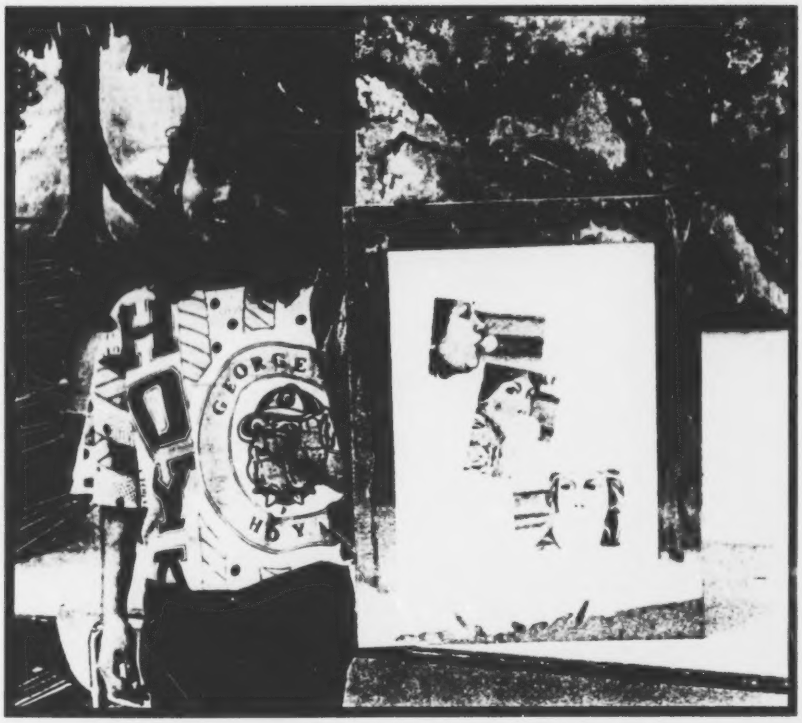
In both instances, the alumni began to organize formally in order to provide continuing support for current students. The contrasts were dramatic–successful African-American adults speaking to young people who rarely saw such success around them. For schools struggling to provide the minimum and find a spirit, there were memories of a time when the schools–then, as now, predominantly African-American–were full of activities and spirit and a commitment to further education. There were lessons for all.

Learning to Live with Success

In little ways, students in these very poor schools have a hard time with success. It is not something they know or know how to deal with. Linda McFadin's Shakespeare troupe at Louisville's Western Middle School scrambled to fill a lead role because the student chosen for it withdrew, not understanding the honor. As they began to emerge from a dull curriculum, more and more students throughout the Clark schools posted academic awards, but often parents–and on occasion the students themselves–failed to attend award ceremonies, unaware of the importance of what was happening.

Computer technology is the key to the future for middle school students. Librarian Judy Mory helps a student at Iroquois in Louisville.

"There is something in the students that sometimes they aren't able to see themselves," says Mary Galinowski, an extraordinary art teacher at Kosciuszko Middle School in Milwaukee. Her students consistently win awards for their art. Among the recent winners was Awilda Hernandez, a



Kosciuszko Middle School student Awilda Hernandez won first place awards in Milwaukee and Wisconsin contests. She's not convinced of her talent, but praises her teacher "who encourages you not to give up."

shy 14-year-old who does not believe she has talent, although the proof is otherwise all around her. In one year, she won first place awards in both city and state contests. "I don't think I am good at it," she says, after some prodding. She just knows she enjoys trying out different media and has a teacher "who encourages you to not give up. I may not want to finish something, but she says it is good and to keep going."

Awilda did not attend one ceremony where she was the star, and Galinowski believes Awilda and her family "need many more opportunities than suburban kids to make connections to the world." They have not had recognition before, and they don't understand it, she says.

A group of students at Western Middle School used recognition to overcome an insult that might have done them in. Science teacher Sandy Mayer, working with a team of volunteer teachers, shaped an Odyssey of the Mind team at Western, giving a few students an opportunity to compete with other schools on creativity. Students throughout the country participating in the Odyssey of the Mind are given the same project to do—for example, they must solve a problem and write a play around it, using certain words. Competitions include the given project, as well as an improvised one for the school teams. Meeting every day after school to practice, the Western team flopped its first year; by the second year it came in second in regional competition and fourth in the state. In the third year, Western won the regional, beating a team from the "other side of town," whose members complained that they had been beaten "by those dumb kids from Western."

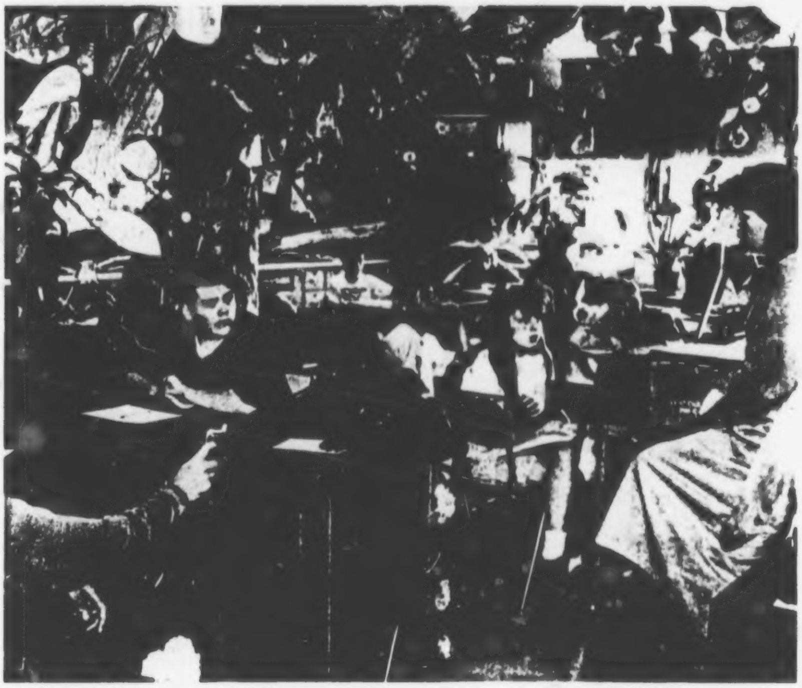
Mayer and her team took this remark almost as a mantra. They laughed about it, they sneered at it, and they went on undaunted, because they knew they were good. "We have to act our best when we compete," one student remarked, "because we are not expected to." In 1992-93, the Western team—from the most poverty-ridden middle school in Louisville, those "dumb kids"—placed first in the state in the long-range problem competition.

> *"We have to act our best when we compete," one student remarked, "because we are not expected to."*

Standing in her classroom transformed by students into a rain forest—including a waterfall and a map showing the piece of the South American rain forest they "bought" with their donations—Mayer comments that every year of teaching at Western "is like ten years' experience anywhere else." She is convinced that "our children can do everything; we just have to stop being a hindrance, let go, and allow them to learn."

The Clark emphasis on support coincided with new state funding in Kentucky for youth services centers in schools highly impacted by poverty. All three of the Louisville network schools qualified to open such centers, which are now providing student and family counseling.

At Roosevelt Junior High School in Oakland, a counselor has shaped a youth services center that is an oasis in a drab building overcome by the problems of a very large, very diverse, very poor student body. The carpeted, air-conditioned, pleasantly furnished center provides individual and group counseling as well as therapy sessions for students. Counselor Peter Langhoff, who designed the center, is working on his clinical license in psychology, as are two other counselors at Roosevelt. With such credentials, they can provide needed services on site. "I am seeing kids in a whole different way," he says, noting that his training helps him deal directly with the problems that trip up Roosevelt students—racial strife, lack of support



Science students at Western Middle School in Louisville transformed Sandy Mayer's class into a rain forest that included a waterfall.

from families, and "a crying need for personal attention." Langhoff enlisted Cambodian- and Japanese-speaking counselors and arranged for more than $25,000 worth of pro bono services for Roosevelt students through his various contacts. The center office is overflowing with young people who have finally found adults who listen.

In every Clark school, some support project for students is underway, spontaneously or in response to offers from the community. Several schools have resurrected sports teams—at Calverton, students must attend Saturday academic classes to participate. Western Middle School has community support for a college scholarship program for students selecting the academically rigorous Western High School. Before this, no students picked Western High; in the first year of the program, at least 14 signed up. At Muirlands, student government was energized and integrated.

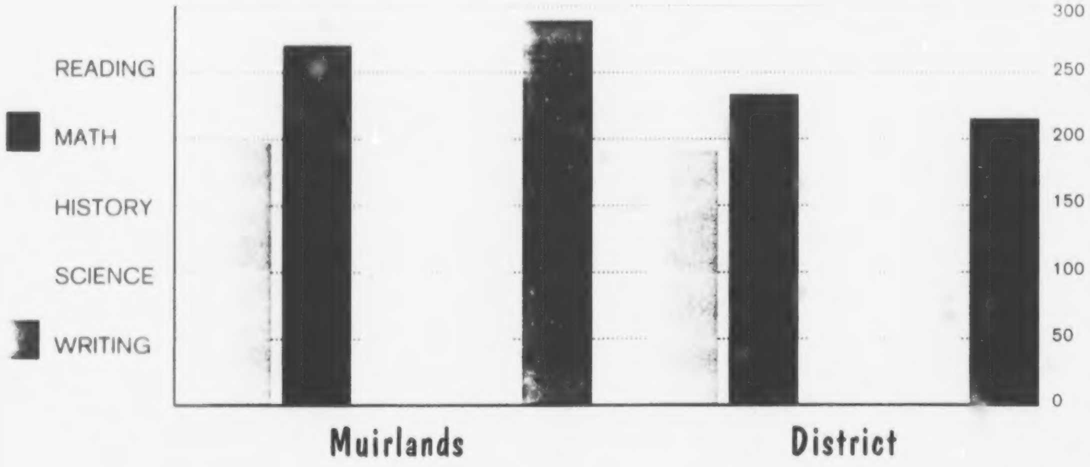
The middle schools in Baltimore and Milwaukee are using peer mediation to help students deal with anger. Geraldine Morbeck, the peer mediator coordinator at Parkman Middle School in Milwaukee, says teachers used to tell students who were arguing to "go talk it out somewhere." And the "talk" would often turn into fights. Now the students go to the peer medi-

Number of Student Retentions Per Year
Louisville, Kentucky

	1988/89	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93
Iroquois	50	8	3	15	12
Southern	131	20	17	8	0
Western	54	1	5	3	2

Data from Jefferson County Public Schools.

1991/92 Test Scores for 8th Grade Hispanic Students
San Diego, California



Data from California Assessment Program.

ation center, covered all day by a teacher or administrator with 40 trained student mediators on call. If the students agree to mediation, two of their peers hear out the problems using a specific format and help them come to an agreement. An adult remains in the hall, ready for any issues the mediators cannot handle.

Referrals to the principal are way down, according to Morbeck, and she frequently hears students interrupt an argument, saying "You should go to mediation!" After seven years at Parkman, Morbeck still cannot accept the reality that "these kids choose to hurt themselves." Peer mediation does not solve problems created by the values they learn outside of school, she believes, but letting the students know mediation "is a school life-style" gives them an alternative to think about.

Peer mediation coordinator Geraldine Morbeck in Milwaukee notes that referrals to the principal are down, and she often hears students interrupt an argument, saying "You should go to mediation!"

The Bottom Line

Do all of these efforts–challenging students with high content, giving them more control over their learning, supporting their needs, finding adults to guide them–prepare them better for options in high school? After all, it is the capacity to be good students when they leave the middle grades that is the most important measure of the Clark intervention.

There is some hard evidence–and a lot of anecdotal evidence–that students in the Clark schools are beginning to smell success. Where cumulative school district data are available, especially in Louisville and San Diego, students in the Clark schools are showing academic improvement, some of it very dramatic. The Barrio students attending Muirlands Middle School, for example, were below district averages for Hispanic students in all academic subjects before the Clark initiative began; they are now above the average in all academic subjects. The writing scores of students at Mann improved while the overall district average declined. Louisville's students made considerable improvement on the state performance and portfolio assessments. Johns Hopkins University research indicates Baltimore students participating in Student Team Reading and Student Team Writing outperform control group classes on standardized tests.

Louisville's students made considerable progress on state performance and portfolio assessments. Hands-on learning, like Jan Preher's math class at Iroquois, is beginning to make a difference.

In many schools, absenteeism and discipline referrals are down, as are retentions from grade to grade. Students are requesting more high-academic, college-prep classes. Yet, it is not all good news. Academic indicators have dropped in some schools in the network, usually those with higher absentee rates. They also are lower in those districts where accountability to produce results in the schools got lost somewhere in the bureaucracies. Advisory committees, or district liaisons, or annual plans do not guarantee results. Persistent pressure, aided by useful data and technical help directed at improving teachers' expectations and skills, are the ways districts bring about better student outcomes.

None of the 12 schools is satisfied with the learning gap that still exists between their students and the district averages, although both San Diego schools are close to or above the average in their district. Ron Barber, Western's former principal, said at the end of four years that he saw "kids with their eyes up, their shoulders back, with more purpose, and, I hope, with a better sense of what they want to do with their lives." But that's not enough, he admits. Even though the schools have come a long way, "the mountain we have to climb is very steep."

FAMILIES/ PARENTS

Urban middle schools want parent involvement, desperately. Few schools know how to get it.

There is frustration on all sides. People in the schools believe if they could just establish some rapport with their families, school values might rub off, and in many places they also might begin to ease some of the pain and anger students bring to school that prevents them from focusing on their education. "Attendance and parents go together," says a disillusioned Skip Clemons, principal of Southern Middle School in Louisville. He is empathetic to parents: "Some are working more than one job; lots are disaffected with schools because of their own experience as students." But he's also impatient: "We've tried every way to get them to see how important it is for their kids to attend; but parents think they did okay without doing well in school, and that affects their kids' attitudes."

Many parents, on the other hand, don't believe teachers and administrators are listening to them. Parents in a computer class at Parkman Middle School in Milwaukee started a newsletter, partly to communicate to other parents about school affairs, but also to coach the staff about parent concerns. Certainly, schools with high percentages of limited-English speaking families require nontraditional communications strategies. English-only newsletters won't do, but sustained personal contacts by school representatives who speak the same language might. Even when the language is clear, however, the perceptions sometimes are not. One principal feels many of her parents "are a mess"; a parent coordinator at the same school believes many, also, are "too shy to participate; they have no confidence in themselves."

The Clark initiative provided support in four of the five communities for outside groups to improve parent involvement in the schools. Their activities included:

✓ Multicultural collaboration for parent training, guided by a professional staff.
✓ Homework as a bridge to parent involvement.
✓ Parent advocates for the schools.
✓ A curriculum-based approach for students and parents to stimulate greater parent involvement.

The major accomplishments included:

✓ Special efforts to reach parents where there had been little, or very traditional, outreach before.
✓ Greater numbers of parents in the schools, as participants in ceremonies or as volunteers.
✓ More opportunities for parents to learn new skills themselves.
✓ Establishment of parent centers.

If schools don't give parents a picture of what is going on, "parents will take the side of their children," says a Baltimore parent volunteer, in trying to explain why parents get angry at schools. Parents felt as alienated as the students in Milwaukee's Parkman Middle School, because the school did not visibly acknowledge its 98 percent minority population. A new art teacher and new principal introduced more cultural sensitivity through exhibits, library purchases, and curriculum changes that were as useful for the staff, which is two-thirds white, as for students. The parent coordinator, Shirley Owens, organized a gathering of alumni, also mostly minority, who came and showed "such love for this school," she says. "The teachers saw a different group of adults, for the first time."

Misunderstandings can even occur about homework, if parents and teachers do not communicate. Teachers consider homework an extension of school, but, as Cheryl DeMarsh, principal at Louisville's Iroquois Middle School points out, few students or parents in low-income families view home as a place for education. Researchers in Baltimore discovered some parents considered homework as punishment for students who don't complete their work in school.

MANN PARENTS
MAKE A DIFFE

Carmen Sandoval, left, organized the first-ever parent center at Mann Middle School in San Diego. "I'll do anything," she says, "to help every parent help their child."

Never Say Never

There are some principals in the Clark network of schools who are close to giving up on parents. The best action we can take, they say, "is to grow our own parents," to make sure the students in their schools have the skills and attitudes to break away from family patterns of apathy, abuse, and disdain for education.

Others are not as pessimistic, looking to the slow growth of parent volunteers and positive parent interactions as hopeful signs. "We must have parents in the flow," says DeMarsh. "If we give up, we will be in more trouble."

Considering all the challenges at Mann Middle School in San Diego–more than 30 languages spoken by students, severe overcrowding–increasing parent involvement might have been one problem to put on the back burner. It wasn't, and as a result, this amazingly diverse and very large school "has become parent friendly," according to principal Julie Elliott. Shucking the traditional, minimal-involvement PTA/open house model, the formal parent association took deliberate steps to be more inclusive of its diverse families. Parents participate on the school's steering committee and on some standing committees; and a parent center draws parents in for a variety of reasons, despite the mix of languages and cultures.

"I'LL DO ANYTHING....."

Armed with her own coffee pot and a borrowed refrigerator, Carmen Sandoval set up business. She turned what had been a career room at Mann Middle School into a lively parent center that serves as a bridge for parents and teachers.

When Sandoval was helping with school registration a few years ago, she noticed that "parents were very shy." A school volunteer for almost 20 years, she knows how important it is for parents to find out how they can help their children. She became involved, because "I wanted all my children to learn to read, write, and to graduate from school," a determination that served her well as the organizer of the first-ever parent center for Mann.

"All ethnic groups are reluctant to get involved with schools," Sandoval believes. Before the center opened, "they had no one here to communicate with them regularly–and they did not know they had a right to be here." After all, she says emphatically, "it is their school. Parents make the community."

It is not easy to entice parents from so many cultures into Mann, but Sandoval gives them lots of choices. A large job board across one wall lists the description of work to be done by volunteers–accompany a field trip, work in the library, translate. Sandoval finds someone for every request. Teachers and counselors also drop in to have parent notices translated into the home language. Community aides in the center speak the five major languages in the school; the center tries to find emergency translators for the others.

English classes taught by a community college instructor are offered three times a week; child care is provided. Under a community program, between 40 and 60 families each month receive a large box of groceries for only $13 plus two hours of volunteer work in the school. The June Burnett Parent Institute, with funding from the Clark initiative, established a coalition of ethnic groups called the Home-School Partnership, which offers parenting classes at Mann every week. The Chicano Federation, a participant in the partnership, held parenting graduation at San Diego State University, giving parents an opportunity to visit a college campus while they were being honored. Sandoval and five parents from Mann have participated in advanced training offered by the partnership, learning, for example, where to refer parents in need of other services in the city.

At monthly parent meetings, Sandoval brings in community resources, such as the police to talk about gangs and drugs. At one meeting, she reports, about 50 parents, businesspeople, and educators mapped plans "to take the parks and the streets back from gangs, drugs, and prostitutes."

Standing under a long sign on a bulletin board that says "Parents Make a Difference" in seven languages, this never-still, parent-turned-organizer tells about plans for an international potluck dinner for parents, describes the Tostado Bar parents put on for teachers, praises a grandmother who is at the school every day at 7 a.m., and wonders how to get money from the community to buy award certificates to give to key volunteers.

"I'll do anything," Sandoval says, "to help every parent help their child."

Hitching on to Homework

In the two Baltimore schools, both with high enrollments of African-American students, an ambitious program is reaching parents. And despite research that shows teachers in such schools doubt the ability of parents to help on content, the program is all about content. Teachers also are learning they can develop ideas that catch the interest of parents.

The program is called Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork or TIPS, an outgrowth of the schools' connection to researchers at The Johns Hopkins University. For several years, Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins had been noting the positive effect on students' reading abilities when parents conducted activities at home. Working during the summers, Epstein and the teachers developed homework activities in language arts and science/health for grades 6-8; math assignments are next on the list. Students and families do oral history, conduct kitchen experiments, discuss healthy choices. So far, 240 specific assignments are available. A retired school principal, Vivian Jackson, keeps up the momentum during the school year, visiting teachers and helping collect research data on the effect of

Teachers who involve parents begin to see them as allies. In Baltimore, Elaine Cates and her grandson Ronald Mundell work on homework together, part of a program called TIPS.

Learning Together

Young Ronald Mundell, a sixth grader at Calverton Middle School in Baltimore used to rush through his homework; he didn't talk to anyone in the family about it. Now his watchful grandmother, Elaine Cates, not only slows him down, but also becomes a part of the process.

Together, they study proper and common nouns. She helped him make puppets for a classroom project to dramatize commercials written by the students. They wrote their obituaries together, and they designed a poster about drug abuse. But it was during Black History Month that grandmother and grandson really got to know each other better. "He interviewed me about different African-American role models, and that started us talking about a lot of things," she says.

Fridays have become family nights in the household, an apartment just a block from the school. Ronald and his grandmother, sometimes with other family members, read books and poems. For the grandmother, this is a way to make up for the age difference. "You get out of touch," she says, "unless you know what they are reading about." She finds the TIPS assignments challenging and is pleased for her grandson that learning doesn't stop after school.

As for Ronald, "I like the homework, but it takes too much time."

"That," says his grandmother emphatically, "is because we are taking time."

the assignments on homework patterns, parent contacts, and student achievement.

A large percentage of families and teachers "have changed their patterns of communication about homework from previous years," according to a report by Epstein and other Johns Hopkins researchers. Parents are more aware of what is going on at school and believe the teachers who ask them to help are better teachers. For their part, teachers who regularly involve families "begin to see more parents as allies." Students using TIPS turn in more homework than others, and they are more willing to talk about school work at home. Because of the realities in some students' homes, the assignments can be done with any adult, even a neighbor. "We had kids doing the work alone and signing off on it," says former Calverton principal Frances Ellington. "What's important is that they interact with an adult."

TIPS isn't for every school. The Louisville schools, for example, decided against using it because too many of their parents work night shifts. In Baltimore, however, the TIPS assignments have been loaded into a curriculum resource bank available to all teachers in the system through their own desk computers. According to Epstein, TIPS not only helps teachers make contact with homes, but also "puts kids in contact with their parents." Her research shows that the shared homework experiences have changed relationships at home for 50 percent of the students participating. Likewise, 50 percent of the parents who did not know what the schools were doing previously now say they do.

Tina Quiles, bilingual director at Kosciuszko in Milwaukee, ropes parents into chaperoning field trips in order to expand their horizons, too.

In Little Ways.....

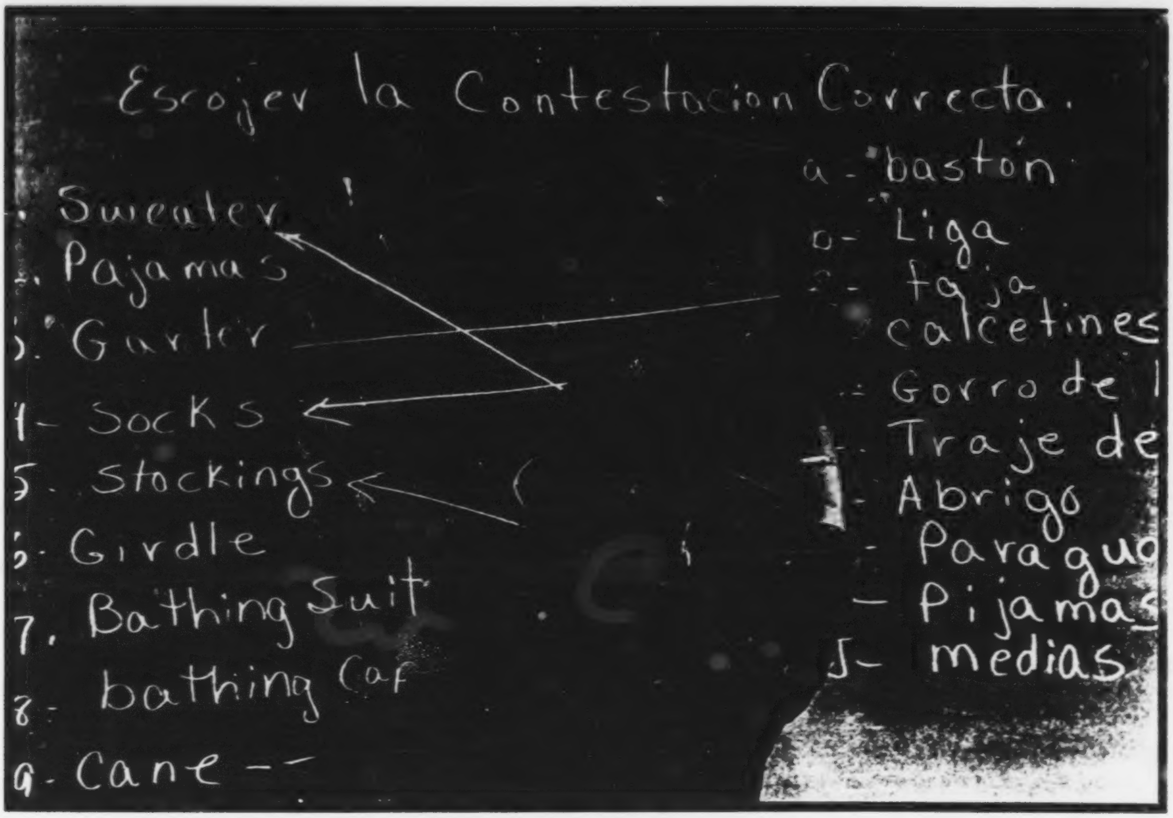
Most of the Clark parent initiatives are less structured than TIPS. But the schools will try almost anything. Sometimes, pure advocacy is the answer. Tina Quiles, bilingual director at Kosciuszko Middle School, the bilingual magnet middle school for Milwaukee, pushes her parents to get involved and to stand up for their children. For example, Quiles helps parents insist their children remain in bilingual classes until they are ready to be mainstreamed; and she designs the bilingual program around the literature and math curricula that students will encounter in regular classes, not on low-level language drills. So she reasons with parents that the bilingual program sets high standards for its students. She ropes parents into chaperoning field trips in order to expand their horizons, too. They tell her that their children "are not the only ones who have not seen the world." This closeness with families partly explains why students in the English-as-a-Second-Language program at "Kozy" have lower absentee rates than the other students and have shown, on average, more academic progress.

Aiding the parent thrust at Kozy is Daisy Cubias, an energetic organizer under Milwaukee's Empowerment Program, funded by Clark through the Greater Milwaukee Education Trust. Over four years, Cubias estimates that she, her colleague Shirley Owens at Parkman Middle School, and parent volunteers have knocked on doors of students' homes and invited themselves in more than 2,450 times. This is a big leap from 1989, when there were no home visits. The increase in attendance at parent meetings and special events is also impressive, though it still represents only a small minority of parents.

Cubias is quick to say the real importance of the Empowerment Program is its development of advocacy leadership among parents. "We support the parent agenda," she says. In a report to the Trust, Cubias and Owens noted that parents were tired of being asked to "get involved," only to find out that involvement meant baking cookies. What parents wanted, said the coordinators, was empowerment, and that's what Cubias and Owens have given them. The long-term goal of empowerment is to help parents become a strong force in improving their children's achievement. First, however, Cubias and Owens realized parents needed skills and self-confidence. Parents write and produce newsletters in their own computer classes, working on articles that focus on academic and social supports for students. Volunteer time puts them in contact with students during school hours and with other parents not yet involved.

Daisy Cubias, the parent organizer at Kosciuszko, estimates that in four years, she, her Parkman counterpart, and their parent volunteers have knocked on more than 2,450 doors and invited themselves into students' homes.

Linda Woods, a parent volunteer at Parkman, helped with mailings and called families when students were absent or meetings were planned. Both Clark schools in Milwaukee started a contract program in which students, parents, and teachers agree to certain goals, including homework. One of


Escojer la Contestacion Correcta.
Sweater
Pajamas
Garter
Socks
Stockings
Girdle
Bathing Suit
bathing Cap
Cane
bastón
Liga
faja
calcetines
Gorro de
Traje de
Abrigo
Paragua
Pijamas
medias

At Kosciuszko, parents, as well as students, go to school.

Woods' assignments was to call parents when homework assignments were missing. Most of her work–1,000 volunteer hours in one year–was spent going door to door in her neighborhood, talking to parents. "Parents really want to help their children," she says, "but they are afraid they don't know how. I could tell them: 'I'm a parent just like you, and this is how I got involved.'" Hired as a security guard at Parkman in 1992, Woods credits Owens with "helping me to find my voice in the school." Now, she points out, "Owens asks me to please be quiet!"

The coordinators help parents learn how to help their children make informed choices for high school, a factor that contributes to the increase in the number of students selecting more challenging magnet high schools. Parents also now participate in school planning. In the summer of 1993, the two coordinators organized a city-wide Parent Educator Institute, a week-long workshop to train others on the strategies they have used at the

Clark schools. Parent empowerment was spreading.

Effective Parenting Information for Children (EPIC) is a nationally developed program aimed at improving students' self-esteem through an advisory-type curriculum and parents' self-esteem through workshops. This was the parent involvement program selected in Louisville and proved to be very effective for classroom discussions and in enabling children and parents to talk things over. Western Middle School also reached out to parents through an awards program based on their children's nominations. The monthly Falcon Awards, honoring parents with flowers, lunch, and speeches, have drawn out a difficult parent group—generations of Appalachian parents marooned in the poverty-stricken Portland section of Louisville. The grandparents of today's students attended Western—and dropped out as soon as they could. Wooing these families back is difficult, but from only a few family members attending the awards programs at first, the school can now expect as many as 50 to show up.

Principal Ron Barber was frustrated during his four years at Western because he saw so many angry children in the school. Parents settle their problems by violence, Barber explained. They did not understand why the school insisted on disciplining students who did the same in school. Just days before he retired, he broke up an after-school fight that roamed through the neighborhood, with parents on the sidelines egging their children to fight. At least at Western, he said, the youth services center and awards for positive attitudes were trying to give parents an alternative type of involvement.

Most parents want their children to be successful and happy. Schools want the same for their students. These ships passing in the night must find ways of communicating with each other.

Except for those who are extremely troubled, parents want their children to be successful and happy. Schools want the same for their students. Somehow, these ships passing in the night must find ways of communicating with each other. Considering the mistrust and/or cultural differences between schools and families, it is the school that must signal first: "We want you here. We want you involved with us and with your child's education. We have resources to help you."

THE SYSTEM

Urban school systems can "talk the talk." They are good at writing proposals and preparing quarterly reports. Their superintendents are accessible to funders. They are all for reform across the system.

But can they really walk down that path?

More than words are needed to get them moving, and the push must come from a combination of events and forces that forge both bottom up and top down efforts. No single influence can move urban school systems to change.

When the five urban districts accepted the challenge from the Clark initiative to support fundamental change in a few schools, they also agreed to use the project as leverage for change across the system. None had tried systemic change in the middle grades. And they were clearly breaking new ground, for no other urban school system had done it either. In the 1970s, some urban systems adopted the middle-school philosophy, but leadership and funding had dissipated over the years. Little was left of this effort.

For some of the districts, follow-through on the promise to create systemic change proved to be uncomfortable, extremely difficult, and at the end of four years, hardly visible, although none is as negligent of systemic change as when the Clark initiative began. In the districts that met the challenge, however, more than the middle schools benefitted. Louisville and San Diego proved that urban school systems, those maligned bureaucracies, could overcome their image and move reform out of isolated pockets, influencing overall policy and practices across the system. It was never easy. School systems needed the energy, skill, and commitment of teachers ready to share their expertise. They also needed their own district-wide plan for reform.

The Clark initiative:

✓ Affirmed the importance of systemic change by channeling funding through the central office rather than directly to schools.

✓ Encouraged districts to develop an overall vision for middle grades reform by requiring follow-up plans at each stage of grant renewal.

✓ Included district central office officials in national meetings and networking activities.

✓ Insisted on a coordinator within the central office organization to be the liaison to the middle-level schools in the project.

✓ Required districts to develop a data base that monitored progress in the schools.

The major accomplishments included:

✓ A roll-out of ideas from the project schools to other middle schools in the district in some of the cities.

✓ A more informed knowledge base about urban school change that helped shape districts' long-range plans for middle schools.

✓ A specific planning process for middle grades reform in the districts' long-range plans, giving these grades the specific attention they need.

If school district leadership endorses the idea of systemic change so willingly, why is it so hard to pull off?

Undoubtedly, the financial stranglehold on urban systems creates turmoil. Milwaukee was forced to cut $137 million from their budget requests over a three-year period, and taxpayers also denied the district's bond issue to upgrade facilities and institute some reforms. San Diego had to cut its adopted budget by $47 million over a two-year period because of the state's fiscal crisis.

Continuity of leadership in urban systems is a problem. "School boards do not value stability," consultant Don Rollie notes, as the principals he works with rush through the revolving door. This environment pervades central offices, where people are shifted around continuously, sometimes as adjustments to budget cuts, but more often because the offices are constantly being reorganized to suit a new superintendent's plan or to force an old plan to work.

Criticized for not supporting continuity in schools, central offices tend to blame teacher unions, saying tenure and seniority destabilize faculties.

No single influence can move urban school systems to change the way youngsters like these West Baltimore students learn. Reform must come from a combination of events and forces that forge both bottom up and top down efforts.

However, the lack of investment in leadership for schools–selecting and training future principals–is a fault that can only be laid at the central office door.

In large school systems, central offices and schools develop separate cultures. The priority of many central offices, according to Rollie, "is to ameliorate the political structure downtown, to deal with the business community and other power structures." Providing instructional leadership for the schools gets lost because officials in the central office view schools as existing to support them, not the other way around. "You don't understand our problems" is a frequent complaint of district leaders. Rollie believes there are too many layers of bureaucracy between top decision-makers and those at the school building level. He notes, as a contrast, that Donald Ingwerson, superintendent in Louisville until the summer of 1993, eliminated all middle layers and made principals directly accountable to him. This is one of the reasons credited for Louisville's success as an urban district during Ingwerson's leadership.

The Clark initiative also found that a program-centered mentality is as pervasive at the district level as it is within schools. Adept at securing funds through development offices and other resources, urban central offices believe they have done their work once the check arrives, agreeing to superficial advisory and monitoring functions, but not inclined to pay more than minimal attention. Each initiative an urban district coaxes into the school system is treated separately, even though one person may be put in charge of all of them. San Diego is an exception. With a limited business community to rely upon for support (much of San Diego's economy is government-related), the district leadership decided they needed outside support to supplement their efforts–through foundations, federal grants, and others. Officials then organized to make sure these fit into the school district's overall goals, creating a management structure that directly links each program with the central office.

In large school systems, central offices and schools develop separate cultures.

The Bottom-Up Strategy

Some observers of the school reform movement in this country question whether teachers, trained mostly to teach white middle-class students with content that is not particularly engaging, can measure up.

The Clark initiative tapped into talent and initiative among many teachers. They are the ones who carried the message of successful changes in practice into their own districts and beyond. Almost every principal in the Clark network welcomed the opportunities for teachers to learn from others and then to present their stories at district and national meetings. These were new opportunities for teachers, usually isolated in urban schools where staff development had been organized by outsiders, with little follow-up.

At the same time teachers had new stories to tell, the National Middle Schools Association opened up its meetings to more urban presentations. From almost no attention to urban education (NMSA's origins arose from university researchers and suburban schools), the annual meetings of NMSA now include dozens of urban presentations, many of them part of the Clark network.

Teachers fertilizing the ground for change are most evident at home, however. The process evolved, starting with teacher visits to other schools or summer institutes where staff development programs led to sharing ideas. When there was a particular focus for the summer institute–such as interdisciplinary team planning in San Diego–middle school teachers from beyond the Clark schools participated. A few individual teachers among the 12 schools ran far with staff development, becoming consultants to other schools or districts. True, this can create jealousy within a school faculty, but the opportunity to take advantage of the resources was available to all.

At the end of four years, teachers from the Clark schools had stepped out as city-wide leaders. Teachers in the two Baltimore schools held a staff development day for each other and wrote a report of what had been learned from participation in the Clark project. With the help of the Center for Early Adolescence, teachers in several districts began planning reports to pull together the best-practice ideas they found most useful for distribution district-wide.

When schools become "professional communities of learners," they eliminate isolated innovation. The "lone ranger" teacher willing to break from traditional practice can become the norm. Gail Dommers at Muirlands (second from right) takes her English class outdoors.

Almost serendipitously, central office leaders in some of the cities recognized this homegrown leadership as a promising strategy for systemic change. Research shows that when schools become "professional communities of learners," they can introduce and sustain change and end the isolation of the "lone ranger" teacher willing to break from traditional practice. In San Diego, Louisville, and to some extent, Milwaukee, this understanding developed at the district level. "Colleague to colleague is the best catalyst for discussing ideas and getting inspired," Thomas Payzant said just before he left the superintendency of San Diego to join the Clinton Administration. In Louisville, the central office is supporting networks of teachers ready to organize around particular ideas–the Socratic Seminar, science and math alliances, writing across the curriculum. Robert Jasna, Milwaukee's deputy superintendent in charge of the Clark initiative, echoes the same idea. Teachers who have learned from such programs as cooperative grouping and advisories "do not see their experiences as limited to their school. They talk about what they can do system-wide," he says.

San Diego has institutionalized this idea.

Listening to Ourselves

Like all of the Clark schools, those in San Diego concentrated their funding on staff development. First, they did their own for the two project schools; then they began sharing it in summer institutes. To roll out the ideas, the school district sponsored an unusual staff development activity in 1992–an "un-conference"–a day set aside for teachers to visit other classrooms across the city, with substitutes paid by the Clark initiative. Each school, as a follow-up, gave every participating teacher a matching release day to work on the ideas they observed.

While this event was successful, it also was expensive (substitutes cost the district $100 a day). Almost immediately after the un-conference, the central office staff began lobbying middle school principals to set aside one of their regular four staff development days for a district-wide, middle-level conference in 1993.

"Educators like to listen to each other" rather than outside experts, points out Cat Xander, liaison from the central office to the two Clark schools. Building on this idea, the planning committee for the 1993 conference involved, at some level, representatives from each of the 22 middle schools in the district. It decided on certain goals for the conference:

✓ to demonstrate capacity for teachers to create systemic change;
✓ to provide time to share ideas and planning time to implement them; and
✓ to show teaching strategies that are activity-based and address student diversity.

Staying away from too much reliance on outside gurus as speakers, the planners scheduled only two major speeches and even then, participants could choose a break-out session instead. The group filled the day with presentations by teachers and principals from San Diego schools. "The ideas had to stress active learning, be exemplary, and provide a framework for restructuring," says Xander, explaining that the district has developed general objectives for restructuring that set high expectations for all students. It wanted no excuses for low performance because of the growing language-minority population, which increased from 2,000 to over 5,000 in the middle schools alone between 1989 and 1992.

The March 1993 conference succeeded far beyond anyone's expectations. More than 90 presentations filled the day, accompanied by a barbecue, stress management exercises, and dragon dancers from one of the schools. Teachers and administrators who had moved around in the middle grades re-contacted their peers. "It was great to network, hug, and fill our cups," wrote one teacher, illustrative of the overwhelming endorsement of this use of a staff development day. Within days, teachers were touring other schools, talking about setting up networks, applying to implement programs they had learned about at the conference.

The district, says Xander, had pulled off a successful, renewing experience for 1,300 educators–for less than $6,000.

Juggling from the Top Down

Over the past four years, all five of the urban school systems in the Clark initiative moved toward defining the need and sometimes a plan for district-wide, middle-grades reform. Foundation officials pushed and pulled on this one, but in most instances, the Foundation had help: state frameworks and new assessments in California; new assessments and goals set by the Maryland State Department of Education; and the well-known Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), one of the most significant change agents in the country today.

For Howard Hardin, the district liaison in Louisville, the Clark project confirmed that "you can't change things by just saying 'change.'" It takes new skills and staff development for teachers to make a difference.

The K-12 standards proposed by Milwaukee Superintendent Howard Fuller and adopted district-wide set parameters for middle schools. In Baltimore, several years of floundering at the central office began to stabilize with new leadership under Superintendent Walter Amprey and a plan for a Baltimore City Institute for Middle School Reform, an umbrella for staff development and the linking of scattered innovative programs.

The superintendent in Oakland, Richard "Pete" Mesa, implemented a five-year plan for every school to improve student achievement, with 15 year-round demonstration schools providing models. To prepare the district for converting all junior high schools to middle schools, the Clark schools were folded into the demonstration school group in order to use their experience in planning and trying out new ideas in a systemic way.

In Louisville, the top-down approach, evident both in state policies and the district's use of individual school assessments, needed to be balanced with school-site decisionmaking and the district's desire to free up teacher talent. Howard Hardin, a former teacher and assessment expert, is the juggler in this scene.

Tempered Enthusiasm

For Howard Hardin, the Clark schools have become a personal crusade. He keeps the schools focused, guides them through assessment, and helps to roll out practices across the district.

When he was first assigned to be the district liaison in the Clark project, Hardin was more optimistic than he is now, predicting that progress would show up in student achievement within three years. "I didn't realize," he explains, "that the home and community experiences of students had such a profound effect on how they adjust to learning in a school. Less advantaged moms leave education to the schools, and the challenge becomes one of serving their children with the same amount of time and resources as other schools, while having to make up for the experiences they haven't had at home."

The Clark schools confirmed for him that "you can't change things by just saying 'change.'" He estimates that after four years, 80 percent of the teachers in the three Clark schools have much more positive attitudes toward students. But he's quick to point out that this did not happen because "of an in-service training course on attitude adjustment." It came about, he says, because teachers have new skills.

Hardin sharpened the focus of the Clark initiative. It "began all over the place," but evolved into specific goals through staff development: "helping teachers to know their content better, to understand the art of teaching better, and to concentrate on helping students become active learners."

Able to see the forest better than those caught up in daily school routines, Hardin directed resources toward helping people gain knowledge and skills. Three-fourths of the Clark funding has gone toward staff development. On another level, he kept looking for ways to spread the professional learning taking place in the Clark schools around the district. In the beginning, for example, teachers were not interested in forming networks or sharing across campuses, "but as they got new skills, they wanted to meet and talk about them." Now, the district helps form networks, and teachers are willing to meet after school or on weekends.

He also had another agenda in mind–the impact of KERA on low-performing schools. Under KERA, state assessments determined baseline data about every school in the state, then set a percentage of improvement expected both for academic and behavioral indicators, such as attendance. Teachers and administrators in the Clark schools were much better prepared for KERA's emphasis on writing and critical thinking than were some of their colleagues in other schools. Although the results of the first round of tests in 1991 were disappointing to Hardin, he notes that the feeder schools–both elementary and high schools–around the Clark schools scored even lower than the three middle schools. In order to hone in on the skills important for KERA, the Clark schools moved to an integrated language arts program for 1993-94, combining reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a two-hour block of time. Their experience with journal and portfolio assignments, cooperative learning, and high content overcomes concerns about what to do with squirmy eighth graders for two hours at a time.

"These schools," Hardin says, "were safe places" before the Clark initiative and the KERA assessments, "because there was no measure of success, so people in them didn't have to work very hard."

They are different now. Teachers have new knowledge and skills and are more positive both about student capabilities and their own skills. Fewer teachers are leaving; more are working harder.

Balancing Act

Urban district central offices are not used to being told they need to work smarter, particularly by an uppity national foundation with no political stakes or vulnerability in the community. A majority of the superintendents in the five cities chafed at demands made on their staffs to use the Clark initiative as leverage for district-wide reform of middle grades.

On the other hand, they acknowledge they need help, just like the schools. In addition to removing obstacles, the central office establishes the tone for change, "communicating to all that this is going on," says Yolanda Peeks, assistant superintendent in Oakland, who directs the demonstration project schools and the Clark initiative.

Robert Jasna of Milwaukee recognizes the instability of so much turnover in school systems, both in schools and in the central office. He sees two

Urban school districts are not used to being told they need to work smarter, but they recognize their role in reform. English and drama teacher Donna Blochwitz at Frick Junior High in Oakland confers with a student.

answers. If good practice and openness to ideas become part of teacher networks, such as those oriented around curriculum areas, reforms are more likely to stick, even if teachers move around. Second, "evaluation is crucial." The central office must insist on assessments of school-based reforms so that successful ones become part of a school's culture.

Central administrators sometimes seem caught between a rock and a hard place. If change, either through their efforts or those of an outside intervention, is too prescriptive, the response is superficial, says Peeks, "just enough to not get fired." On the other hand, teachers, schools, and central offices "need to get off dead center," says Donald Ingwerson, who retired in 1993 as superintendent in Louisville after 12 years in that office. Districts, through setting policies and missions for middle grades education, "can provide encouragement with direction, a critical eye." So can outside interventions, while also helping those in the throes of change "get through sticky problems," according to Ingwerson.

Teachers, schools, and central offices "need to get off dead center," says Louisville superintendent Donald Ingwerson.

Ultimately, he adds, students "start doing their own thinking," not because of ideas "from a box," but because people have been given support and respect–and held to high standards. Too many urban systems, he says, have an infrastructure for programs, but not for people.

Looking Ahead

Where do the districts go now on middle school reform?

San Diego, fitting the middle school reform agenda into an overall district plan for restructuring, will continue the work at Muirlands and Mann–and continue to link "islands of excellence" into a systemic approach for staff development, assessment, and accountability across grade levels and schools. The assessment profile developed for the two Clark schools, which includes attendance and suspension data as well as that for achievement, will become a prototype for other middle schools. The staff development resources will emphasize the district priority–to improve language skills of students.

Language arts will also become the focus in Louisville, where staff development introduced through the Clark initiative will be turned on high content, especially integrated language arts. With the help of the Center for Early Adolescence, Louisville will compile the best ideas from an Invitation to

Invention program that gave teachers small, competitive grants to fund individual projects. On a system-wide basis, Louisville is inaugurating a Middle School Initiative that is giving $4,500 planning grants to 20 middle schools other than the Clark schools for reforms based on best known practices in middle grades education. The principal and two teachers from each of the 20 schools will meet monthly to share ideas and discuss concerns.

When reform succeeds, says Louisville's Ingwerson, students "start doing their own thinking." These students at Frick Junior High in Oakland discover a dry ice experiment that encourages independent thinking and is also fun.

The new Baltimore City Institute for Middle School Reform also holds promise. It plans to build on "pockets of excellence" in Baltimore's middle grades, according to Lillian Gonzalez, deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction. In a paper about the Institute written for the Clark Foundation, policy analyst Anne Wheelock noted that the diversity of approaches being used to reform the city's middle grades reflects a realistic view of where different schools are on a continuum of change. No one model will fit all the schools that are at different stages of change. Through the Institute, says Gonzalez, the district leadership will provide an overall strategy that includes gathering data that each middle school can use to plan and monitor progress; disseminating research and best practice knowledge about middle grades education; developing specific models for change appropriate for each school; and providing technical assistance, on-site support, and evaluation. The institute will "create conditions for change," according to Gonzalez. The Clark Foundation also funded Baltimore's Fund for Educational Excellence to bring together all those involved in middle school reforms in the district several times during the 1993-94 school year.

With the help of the local consultant from the Center for Early Adolescence, the two Milwaukee schools and the central office conducted a survey on middle school effectiveness to determine where district goals and the Clark Foundation goals overlapped. Milwaukee plans to dedicate its limited general funds to more intensive staff development in the middle grades. A reform model that has received Foundation support, the Accelerated Schools Project, is to be adopted by another middle school in the district. The deputy superintendent, Robert Jasna, plans stronger links with university resources, such as the University of Wisconsin at Plattsville, which has a middle-school center.

Where systemic change is most visible, good leadership ripples through the system.

The Oakland district admitted in a report to the Foundation that by 1992 "there were serious questions raised about the schools' and the district's commitment and ability to achieve the deep, systemic change necessary to improve student learning." The response was to fold the Clark schools into the Demonstration School Program and to provide more focused leadership from the central office so that knowledge about good middle-grades practices spreads across the district and into district policy.

Oakland will use the Clark schools as key resources for the other three middle schools in the demonstration school network; and Bettye Haysbert, the local Center for Early Adolescence consultant, will be on site to help the three schools through their first year of adapting to a change model. According to assistant superintendent Yolanda Peeks, the Clark schools also will figure in the district planning to reorganize all of the remaining junior high schools into middle schools. Oakland's Middle Grades Task Force is researching curriculum, teaching practices, learning outcomes, and grouping practices best for middle schools. This will encourage the school board to base its decisions on middle grades philosophies rather than become "polarized around boundaries," says Peeks.

Where systemic change is most visible in the Clark network, it has the strong "people" dimensions that Ingwerson sees as essential. Good leadership ripples through the system, from the central office top officials, from those designated as liaisons with skills and authority to bring about change, and especially from teachers and administrators encouraged to make changes.

LESSONS ABOUT BEATING THE ODDS

Extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures. None of the Clark schools or districts fully accepted that premise four years ago, perhaps because they did not realize or want to admit they were losing control over what was happening in their schools.

Today, most of the schools are making an extraordinary effort. To seriously challenge the long-held perception that very poor children cannot learn as well as more advantaged students is in itself a remarkable achievement. Not all have reached a point where high expectations are part of the school culture; some teachers will never accept this idea, principals and colleagues say. But most of the Clark schools stand ready to be a testimony to what urban middle schools can do against tremendous odds.

The pulse in the schools and districts would not have stayed the same, even without the Clark initiative. Too much was happening on other fronts—in state policies, city goal setting, national attention to standards, and particularly, changes in the lives of their children. For some, the early exploitation of staff development offerings provided in the Clark initiative helped to make the inevitable changes less threatening, more of an opportunity.

In four years time, agendas also evolve. Issues that did not seem pertinent at the beginning of the initiative emerged as important. For example, use of computers, often combined with other new technologies, such as CD-ROMs and telecommunications, had not been an early priority in the Clark program objectives, but increased understanding of how technology could aid in other goals, such as writing or critical thinking, moved it up. Planning in Oakland and San Diego now includes a dramatic infusion of technology and refitting of facilities for it. Baltimore is using technology for staff development. Every teacher now has a computer on his or her desk and can call up classroom units and resources, including all of the TIPS

Computer technology was not an early priority in the schools' objectives, but increased understanding of its role in writing and critical thinking moved it up. Iroquois students in Louisville now work on laptops.

homework assignments, from a central file. Also, not until the fourth year of the project did in-school assessment emerge as a vital tool for change. The budget crises in some districts diverted attention and personnel time away from planning reforms, although one district—San Diego—made lemonade out of the crisis, turning to its own teachers and administrators for a highly successful staff development event.

Likewise, the Clark Foundation learned some lessons. In 1992, when the Foundation was choosing new school districts beyond the initial five willing to work on middle school reform, it asked for commitments not made in the first initiative, such as an explicit vision, plan, and timetable for reform; a year devoted to planning; pre-selection of resources rather than selecting from a smorgasbord after the project began; a commitment by at least 75 percent of a school's faculty to participate; matching funds from the district; and a commitment to keep teachers in the schools for at least two years.

In addition to their accomplishments, the five districts examined in this book provide important lessons about urban school change, some obvious, some made less obscure by becoming part of these schools, even briefly.

Quality staff development is the heart and soul of urban school reform. It must have intellectual integrity. It must be reinforced constantly. It must encourage teachers' conversations about important matters concerning teaching and learning. It must incorporate doing as well as talking, allowing teachers to use new ideas and skills, make mistakes, and share their reflections with colleagues. This does not sound like typical staff development, particularly in large urban schools and districts–and that may be a primary reason why such schools seem impenetrable. The first question that good staff development leads to is not "How can I change my students?" but, as one Louisville teacher said, "How can **I** change?"

In order for this shift to take place, **principals must act as levers for change**. Some of the literature about school change cites studies suggesting that enterprising–or very frustrated–teachers can work around apathetic, weak, or oppositional leadership of school principals. These studies did not stay around long enough. Teachers can try to substitute their own leadership for that of principals–and in the Clark schools, some did–but eventually this becomes a futile strategy. It wears people down, and, in the long run, does nothing to change the culture of the school. Even if this tactic succeeds in forcing an undesirable principal out, the destructive habits of confrontation and clique-forming among teachers may remain for a long time.

Furthermore, in a school trying to change fundamentally, only the principal can keep everyone focused on broad goals. When principals get away from crisis management and focus on the learning environment of schools, they become the point persons for balancing time-consuming daily routines against whatever it takes to fulfill the vision the staff has agreed upon. They make time for change; they see staff growth as a necessary component of change.

Rachet this role of leadership up a level to the district. Schools, like teachers, often find ways of being subversive. It's a game they play to avoid district restraints, principals say. Undoubtedly, there are good reasons for wanting to avoid making specific requests to get around certain requirements, the time the process takes being only one. Going around the district may protect a school from what it deems as unwanted interference, but, again taking the long view, neither school nor district wins this game. If the culture of the district leadership is not motivated to change, principals and teachers move on, and the game starts all over again, with no real conclusion. **Where central office philosophies and practices support school change–and this was quite evident in two of the five Clark districts–games are much less necessary.** Like principals, supportive central offices keep their eyes on the prize, using their resources to help schools achieve individually what the district has set as an overall vision.

The first question that good staff development leads to is not "How can I change my students?" but, as one Louisville teacher said, "How can I change?"

Moreover, without district-level commitment to foster middle grades reform, projects such as the Clark initiative will remain isolated incidences of change. It is the district–and only the district–that can nudge the successful experiences of individual schools undergoing reform out into other arenas–policymaking for the district as a whole and exchanges that motivate other schools to move on reforms. And that, after all, is the point of this initiative. If the Clark Foundation were only interested in improving 12 individual schools, it would have had a much simpler challenge.

Even with an abundance of leadership, however, **high-poverty urban schools need outside help, at least to get started on reforms.** Very poor urban schools tend to use up all their energies just to keep going, despite repeated failure. They are often locked into routines that rarely allow time or incentives *to think differently,* much less act so. It is unimaginable to have expected the Clark schools to make as much progress as they have without interventions from outside their culture. Read the newspaper accounts about success-against-all-odds urban schools and eventually you will learn that some philanthropic person, or a grant, or some other means to break away from daily, dispiriting routines became the genesis of change. Urban schools, as well as classrooms, are isolated places. Just being tapped for special attention is a boost to a "forgotten" school's self-esteem. These interventions allow school people to step aside from outmoded habits, see best practices, engage in useful conversations with others about new ideas and programs.

Still, the best kind of external help is homegrown, the Clark initiative learned. Local consultants provided by the Center for Early Adolescence in four of the five cities were always available, unlocking old habits of teachers and schools by being there for questions, even if there were not always easy answers. In Baltimore, strong ties with higher education researchers, accustomed to working with the city's schools, gave constant support.

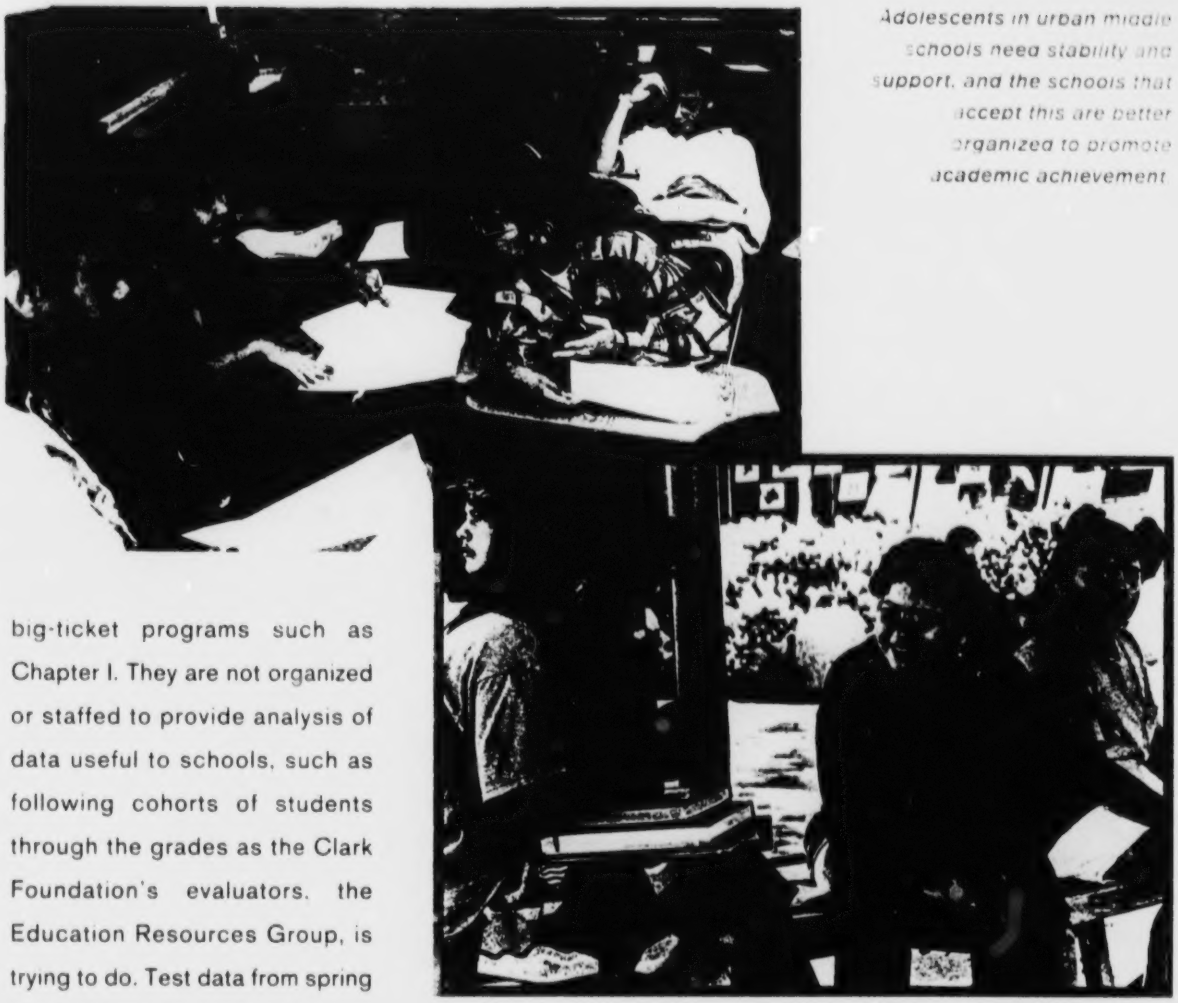
One is tempted to ask, then: Why can't central offices perform this function, considering that there are not enough foundations, grants, or rich individuals to go around? On the basis of the Clark experience, we would have to say it is a rare urban district that is ready and able to step in on its own and do this for its most distressed schools. For example, there must be a direct liaison between the central office and the schools, a person (or persons) who is supportive, but not directive, and who has enough clout to challenge traditional behaviors of the central office that stand in the way of school reforms. Some day central offices may be organized to support rather than regulate; but they are not there yet.

Very poor urban schools tend to use up all their energies just to keep going. They are often locked into routines that rarely allow time or incentives to think differently, must less act so.

Outsiders must understand their limits. If interventions push too fast, are incongruent with what schools need or perceive they need, or if outsiders overload schools with paperwork and classroom interruptions, they invite resistance. Particularly at the beginning of the initiative, many schools felt obligated and overwhelmed with Clark program ideas, until they developed overall plans and learned to select what they needed. Where teachers have been buffeted by too many agendas for change, plans that sometimes conflict with one another as superintendents move in and out of their positions, they begin to mistrust anything billed as a reform. Persistence, tempered with sensitivity, is needed. Partnerships, not pronouncements, are needed.

Those providing outside interventions also can expect tensions with the central office. People in charge—both inside and outside the district—need to work out mutually supportive goals and agreements on accountability. It is unreasonable for a district to expect to "take the money and run" when specific outcomes are expected. But outsiders must learn to roll with changes in priorities at the district level and not overestimate the time districts are willing to spend, particularly when districts are not yet convinced that the effort is a catalyst for district-wide reform.

In some of the Clark cities, this issue of relationships brought to the surface problems as basic as getting district offices to deliver achievement data specific to individual schools, other than state standardized test scores. Evaluation offices of urban districts tend to focus on the requirements of



Adolescents in urban middle schools need stability and support, and the schools that accept this are better organized to promote academic achievement.

big-ticket programs such as Chapter I. They are not organized or staffed to provide analysis of data useful to schools, such as following cohorts of students through the grades as the Clark Foundation's evaluators, the Education Resources Group, is trying to do. Test data from spring assessments, for example, usually arrive at schools late in the following fall with little analysis if any of student scores. They also usually go on the shelf at that point.

There is one observation that remains as pervasive now as it was at the beginning of the Clark initiative. **These urban middle schools yearn for stability and tradition.** Read the markers in their main hallways. Etched on the metal plaques are histories that indicate these schools are often stepchildren in the system. Once these schools were elementary schools, or high schools, or junior highs, renamed every time they were reorganized. They aren't given time to develop an identity and purpose other than one driven by where the enrollment bulge will show up. There also seems to be a mentality among school planners that says when schools are overburdened with problems, a few more won't matter. Urban middle schools are vulnerable to being depositories for students not wanted elsewhere when reorganizations take place. Or becoming schools that take on a concentration of new immigrant students.

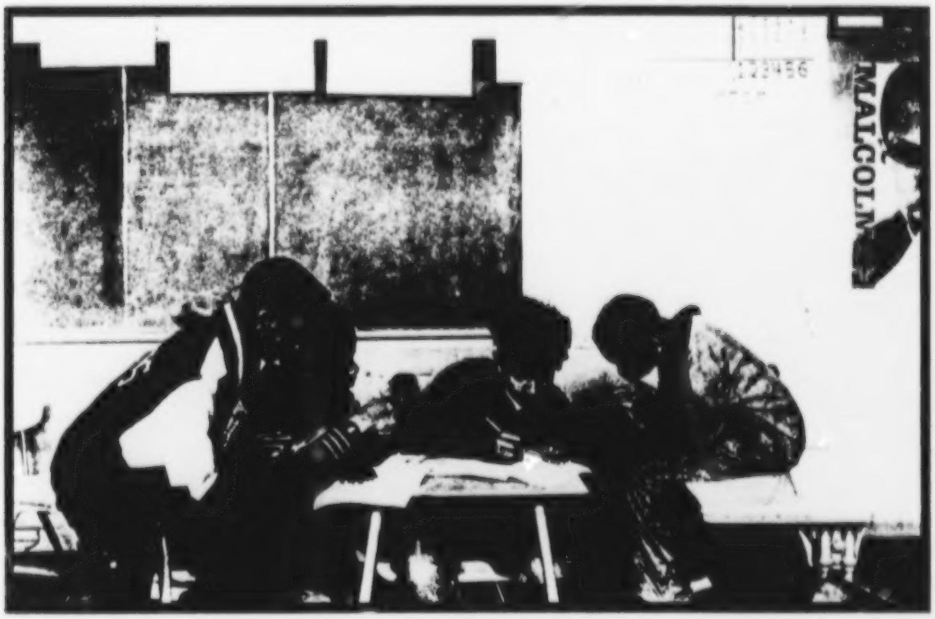
Turnover at every level threatens to undermine reform. Of the 12 Clark principals in place in 1993, 11 are new since the project began. Some schools are now adjusting to their third principal in four years. Teacher turnover in some schools has been as much as one-fourth from one year to the next; in one San Diego school, that meant 25 new teachers in two years. With teacher seniority written in concrete, those most resistant to change cannot be forced out, but the most experienced teachers can opt to transfer. Suburban schools offer more of everything, and often teachers who benefitted the most from the staff development provided in the Clark initiative moved on.

Turnover at every level threatens to undermine reform. Some schools are now adjusting to their third principal in four years.

Student turnover is a given. Just before resigning to become a federal education official, San Diego Superintendent Thomas Payzant tried to put a positive spin on the problem of student turnover by pointing out that "half the students may leave during the year, but half are still there." True, but state and district assessment systems seldom take into consideration, when they announce their evaluations of schools, that some schools may not have had enough time with half of their students to make a difference.

Not even half of the superintendents in the five Clark cities are left. Since 1989, all have been replaced. Until urban district leadership recognizes instability as a major barrier and takes deliberate actions to modify it, schools must live with it.

To achieve some stability for students, **middle grades schools for adolescents growing up in urban America today–children who often lack supportive environments at home–need to lean toward the nurturing side.** Although the students–some retained at grade level two, even three times–may tower over their teachers, they are youngsters who need a lot of stability and support. The schools that accept this, and thus avoid the mini-high school syndrome that discourages teachers from cooperating across departments or giving collective attention to students, are much more aware of what prevents their students from learning. And better organized to promote academic achievement.



Working on a math problem together enhances the self-esteem of all in the group, as these Frick students are finding out.

Schools undergoing fundamental change sometimes may just have to stop, chuck a lot of their early attempts, and start all over again. Mixed messages from the central office, wrong decisions about priorities within a school, or not enough pizzazz to an idea to broaden involvement beyond a few teachers may give school reform a shaky start. All of the schools in the Clark initiative had to sort out their priorities and fit them into an overall vision. A few have had to go back to the drawing board, but they did so with new abilities and fresh ideas.

Although the experience is highly personal and perhaps not often articulated publicly, the teachers and the administrators in these changing middle schools have faced the same dilemma. Old habits and attitudes couldn't simply be "adjusted" around the edges. Personal transformations had to rise out of resistance, confusion, and apathy. They had to experience enough transforming teaching moments to free them of old perceptions.

Finally, urban schools have a problem that can be solved only by honest acknowledgement that it exists–and extraordinary efforts focused on eliminating it. **Judging by the Clark network, those schools with predominantly African-American students have great difficulty in over-**

Students gain as much from community service as do those who receive the help. Here Parkman youngsters talk with patients in a Milwaukee home for the elderly.

coming low expectations for their students. This was evident in at least five of the Clark network schools, scattered among three cities. Certainly, poverty hits particularly hard among African-American families because it is combined with or caused by racial discrimination. Persistently high unemployment rates, stretching over generations, deny urban African-American children a range of successful role models; this creates significant alienation from the school culture among many children. In the middle grades, educators, as frustrated as the students, rely heavily on strong discipline to maintain a learning environment. In these times, that is counterproductive. "These kids are not going to move ahead by fear or threats," said one Clark principal. "Society is not motivated that way anymore."

In the Clark schools with predominantly African-American enrollments, another reason stands out. There are many good teachers in these schools, of all races, who believe their students can learn at high levels. There are others, of all races, who don't. And there are those who frame the problems in the schools around race issues alone. These situations can polarize a school, sap it of energy, and leave the children victims of the inability of adults to straighten out their own values. No quick fixes, such as workshops on understanding cultural diversity, will change deep-seated perceptions, sometimes based on class differences as much as racial ones.

How can this deep distress change? By educators and policymakers working through a list of "musts." Initial teacher education must prepare teachers to teach in poor and/or heavily African-American schools; the knowledge is available, the will to use it is not. More immediately, current teachers must be presented with every possible opportunity to understand the impact of and to use higher expectations and skilled practices with African-American students. The crisis these students find themselves in, especially African-American males, must be matched with a relentless pursuit of success by teachers entrusted with their education. At the same time, student support must be massive and focus on what will give students hope. They need ways to see how schoolwork links to positive options in future education and in careers. They should know what it means to take charge of learning. Schools should organize ways for students to make a difference in their communities. Schools should become centers of support for families, places where students feel safe in non-school hours and parents find resources for themselves as well. These schools must assume a strong commitment to advocacy, in any way and with whatever partners they can find.

That achievements were far from hopes should not detract from what most of these very stressed schools did accomplish–a new culture in which people believe they can change the lives of their students.

To ask schools with so many troubles to raise their expectations and work hard at making sure students succeed would have been empty rhetoric a few years ago. The Clark Foundation set ambitious objectives at the beginning of the initiative. They were not fully realized for the students who attended the schools over these past years, but for students entering the schools in 1993, the objectives might become more achievable, provided the steps already taken lead to bigger ones. That achievements were far from hopes should not detract from what most of these very stressed schools did accomplish–a new culture in which people believe they can change the lives of their students. The proof teachers need–improvement in student achievement and student behavior–is there. Despite mounting distress in the Clark schools and the painfully slow way that change manifests itself, both of which could have convinced teachers to retreat, many, if not most, teachers in this network now believe in their new skills and in their students.

As one Louisville teacher says: "Where would we be if we hadn't tried?"

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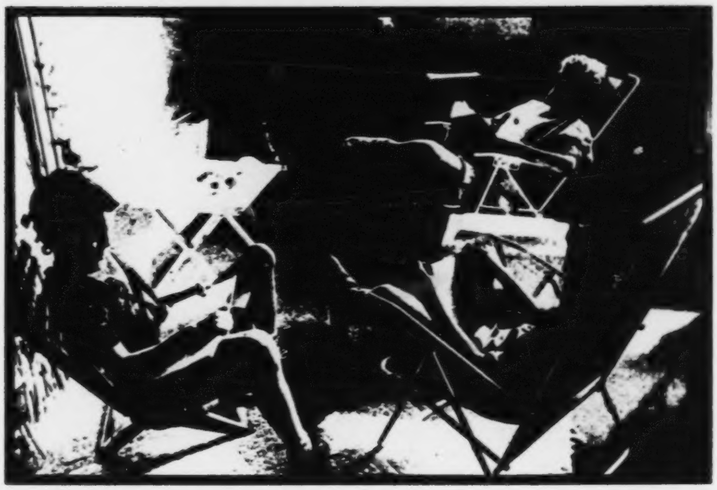

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